

Swing You Sinners

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Swing You Sinners

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Summary

Will Graham is a cop in 1930's Oklahoma City tasked with investigating the disappearance of multiple people connected to a local soup kitchen and homeless shelter. Graham goes undercover as a vagrant looking for work as so many others in the Great Depression and finds himself befriendng the church's priest, Father Hannibal Lecter.

Notes

For those who are curious, the title was inspired by a 1930s jazz song:

Stand up you sinner, we've got you at last.
You can't get away, there's no time to pray,
Your finish is going to be fast.
Brothers and sisters, Come on get hot.
We'll amputate your vo-do-de-o and tie your bones in a knot.

You can't make any excuse, so you'll quail in your boots
'Til we've picked up the noose,
Swing you sinners!
For making chickens elope, you're at the end of your rope,
So just give up all hope,
Swing you sinners!
We'll stretch you like a giraffe, maybe cut you in half,
Just to give us a laugh,
Swing you sinners!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Thank you, enfantdivine for making this great photo manipulation, inspired by the characters from Carnivale!



He wanted to tell him the truth now; that he was there under false pretenses. It had, after all, been a lie, and therefore a kind of sin. The sin was beginning to weigh heavily on his mind. It wasn't that officer Will Graham believed he had done wrong in going undercover. He had taken this assignment in order to save lives, and there was righteousness in that. Lying to Father Lecter in order to keep his cover air-tight was a necessary strategy. But it had come to the point where constructing stories, hiding his true intentions, and speaking blatant untruths to such a man felt wrong. It was especially evident now, when he felt so close to him. There was a profound part of him that wanted to maintain their friendship long after his assignment was complete. How could he possibly do that, when almost everything the kindly priest knew

about him was a fabrication? How could he ever trust him again, knowing that Will could so easily maintain a deceptive façade?

Honest people are bad liars, his momma told him once, long ago. *If someone knows how to lie, it's because that's who he is and that's who he'll always be.*

She would know, having been married to Will's father until the day she died. So maybe he and the old man were cut from the same cloth, despite how much they hated each other. If so, he may as well use his powers for good.

That was what Will had wanted when he became a police officer in the first place. The depression had been in full swing for several years, coinciding with bitter dust storms that devastated the farmlands of Oklahoma. Every day, Will was grateful that he had a good job while so many others were on their knees begging for even a day's worth of work. Even so, he found that most of what he did involved rounding up those same people who were just trying to survive: bootleggers and prostitutes trying to make enough to put food on the table, petty thieves only driven to steal because they were desperate, many of them children. Still, he didn't shirk from his duties. It would be the worst possible time to find himself laid off.

When Captain Jack Crawford came to him with a special assignment, he assumed it would involve cleaning up the underground booze cookers that were still haunting the area even after the prohibition had officially ended. He would have taken the extra hours, absolutely, but putting people out of work and into jail, even people who peddled unregulated and unsafe liquor for the down-and-out of Oklahoma City, would not have brought him much satisfaction.

"There's something about you, kid," Crawford said, looking at the young cop with squinting bulldog eyes that didn't miss much of anything. "You have a nose for misbehavior. You look at people and you can tell that they are up to no good, sometimes even before they know it."

Crawford wasn't wrong. When Will Graham surveyed his beat, he could see the potential schematic of human activity as though it were a staged act playing out before him. He would spot a small boy fidgeting and know if it was because he was hungry or bored or looking to pick a pocket. By the direction of his gaze he could see where he would dart next, and his hand would be ready to clutch the collar of a coat. He could predict every fight before it broke out, who would instigate, and sense when he was being avoided. The organized crime in his area knew better by now than to whistle out warnings or put up hand signals when Will Graham passed. They might as well telegraph to him exactly what they were doing and what gang they ran with. They also knew he couldn't be bought, a disappointing fact about a man who seemed like he would make the best damn scout in the business.

"I want you to look into something for me," Crawford added. "There's been a streak of missing persons in the city. Now, it's not uncommon for folks down on their luck these days to just up and move out with no regard for friends and family, try to find a better place with better prospects and leave their responsibilities behind. None of these folks have been people of means."

"That would be a problem for a task force," Will Graham said. He was nothing if not a bit cynical of how the law worked for some and not so well for others.

“I’m not any happier with the implication than you are, kid,” Crawford replied. He sighed and scratched at his rounded jowl-heavy face. “It’s a bit harder to explain why I need to spend time and resources on investigating what might end up to be a simple case of people getting punchy and skipping town.”

“But you don’t see it that way,” Will inquired. He respected Captain Crawford, despite the fact that he often played the game of politics when he had to. He knew the man was no fool, and was always able to get to the facts of the matter.

“The reports have been stacking up more than usual,” he explained, “loved ones insisting they wouldn’t have left without saying goodbye, that they’d never abandon their spouses or children.”

Will also knew that Crawford was just as cynical as he.

“What else?”

Crawford laughed and patted Will on the arm.

“You’re right,” he said. “They always say that. Then a couple of them mentioned that valuables, even money was left behind. I looked into it, and a few even frequented the same soup kitchen and homeless shelter at a church over in Bricktown.”

“You think someone has been murdering these people and taking what little they have on them?”

“No bodies have shown up. If they are being murdered, it’s not some smash-and-grab mugger,” Crawford added. “Mobsters usually like their hits to turn up and send a message. We may be looking at someone who gets his rocks off from it,”

“Targeting people whose disappearance wouldn’t make the daily pages,” Will said with a grimace. Things were bad enough in Oklahoma without some Jack the Ripper running around picking people off. “Where do I come in?”

“I want you to head over to that church, Our Lady of Mercy. The priest there is one Father Hannibal Lecter; a good man, by all accounts. His soup kitchen feeds hundreds and his shelter houses quite a number as well. Now here’s where you get clever. Don’t go there as a cop. Show up like any other schlepper, stay in the shelter undercover, and see if you can’t sniff out any suspicious types. Then report back to me on a regular basis.”

Chapter 2

“We’ll be needing another pot, Father,” Sister Alana Bloom said, lowering the unwieldy empty pot onto the table. The size of it emphasized her petite frame. She wiped her hands on her apron and thanked the shelter resident who took it away to be washed.

“Quite a crowd,” Father Lecter replied, hoisting up an even larger pot of steaming soup. He was a tall, lean man with sandy blonde hair. He kept his back straight as he carried the pot, his shoulder blades sharp and tight under his black clerical shirt.

“Things aren’t getting any better for people in this city,” Alana sighed, “Your soup is the best thing they’ve had in a long time.”

She smiled at him with gratitude. Before Father Lecter arrived at her parish, they struggled to find the funds to feed dozens with stale bread and watery gruel. Now hundreds lined up, filling their bellies with a hot meal that actually tasted good enough to feed those able to pay money in a restaurant. She reached out to take the pot from him.

“No, please, let me,” Father Lecter offered. “This one is quite heavy.”

Alana’s smile was bright and sincere. Her eyes were touched with wetness when she nodded at him.

“That man is a god-send,” she said to the shelter resident.

“Oh yes, Sister, he most surely is,” she replied.

Father Lecter placed the fresh pot on the table, and smiled when he heard the relieved sighs of those still in line.

“Plenty for everyone!” he called out. He joined the nun at the table in ladling out bowls and breaking off hunks of bread.

“Is this... meat?” a scruffy old man in line gasped when he saw his bowl. The soup was quite thick, with generous chunks of succulent meat.

“Beef,” Father Lecter replied, continuing to serve up the coveted stew.

The old man looked as though he had been given a king’s feast.

“Oh thank you, Father! I haven’t had meat in weeks! And nothing this good!”

Hannibal beamed at him.

“Get on with it!” a man in a red bandanna growled at him. He gave the old man a shove, causing his soup to slosh over the side of his bowl and burn his hands. “Get the fuck out of the way, other people gotta eat.”

Hannibal's eyes rested on the man in the red bandanna. His lips pulled tight over his mouth.

"No need to rush," he said, his voice steady as a metronome. "Your food is right here."

The man grabbed it and began slurping it as he walked off.

"God bless," Father Lecter said, jaw relaxing, eyebrows raised.

The man didn't answer, but gulped down his soup and then threw the bowl onto a table before sauntering off.

The nun standing next to him giggled nervously. Hannibal showed her a reassuring smile.

"We must love even those who make loving difficult, Sister Lillard," he said in a soft tone. "That is the way of Christ."

Sister Lillard nodded at his wisdom.

"Thank God we've been getting more funds lately. We haven't run out of meat once!"

"God will always provide," Father Lecter said.

"Afternoon, Father," a voice said. It cracked a bit, touched by the shame that comes with supplication. He looked forward to see a handsome young man standing before him in a dusty undershirt and overalls, the bib of which was disconnected and hung at his waist like a loin cloth. He clutched his hat in his hands.

"Good afternoon, son," Father Lecter replied. He watched as the boy shuffled for a moment, twisting his hat as though he were wringing a cloth. "How may I help you?"

"I heard you have a shelter here," the man stammered. Father Lecter cocked his head, attempting to look into his eyes, but they were planted on the ground.

"Yes, but I'm afraid we are quite full right now." His voice softened with pity. The young man looked off to one side and bit his bottom lip, eyes growing wet. He released a somber chuckle.

"I figured. That's what they've all been telling me."

"What's your name, son?"

"Will," he answered, thrusting out a hand. Father Lecter accepted. "Will Nance."

"I can give you something to eat, Will."

"Thank you," Will shifted a bit, watching the priest ladle him some soup. As soon as he lifted it, Will blurted, "I can work!"

Father Lecter smiled, eyebrows knit.

“You have upkeep that needs doing on your church?” Will continued, his voice growing desperate, “I have carpentry experience.”

It wasn't a lie. Will's father worked on riverboats and had taught him to be handy.

Father Lecter straightened up a bit and looked over his shoulder.

“We do have a bad hole in our roof. We haven't been able to afford to hire someone. We couldn't pay you money.”

“Oh, I don't need money. I mean, yeah, money...” Will's nervous laugh and manic shrugging were right on point for a man at the end of his rope, a man who had lowered himself again and again for whatever scraps he could get. “But... I just need a place to sleep, food...”

Father Lecter wasn't sure where he could stay. Every cot in the shelter was full, some of them with more than one occupant. Even the pews were stuffed at night with people wrapped in patchy blankets. But this boy was pulling his heartstrings pretty fiercely. He was so young, with such a pleasant face. And boy did that puppy-dog look do wonders for his persuasive abilities. Beds... beds... what would serve as a bed? His mind worked over the interior of his church and rectory.

He pulled Will aside, and spoke softly. “I sleep in a trundle bed, but the lower cupboard has no mattress so I use it to store blankets.”

“I don't need a mattress,” Will whispered. His eyes didn't dart around anymore, but locked with Father Lecter's. That was that.

“All right,” the priest agreed, putting his hand on the boy's arm, “I guess you're bunking with me.”

Chapter 3

Will felt a small twinge of guilt after hearing those words. This man was going to have to share his own bed with him for an indeterminate amount of time, because he believed that he had nowhere else to go. He also felt a bit guilty taking the bowl of soup which was meant to feed someone else, someone who needed it and didn't have the steady income that he did. He repeated to himself, as he thanked Father Lecter and walked to the nearest table, that he was doing it for them. These people deserved to have crimes committed against them investigated, and going undercover was the best way to do it.

He had spent some time readying himself before coming to the church. He'd let his face go unshaven, and stayed awake for a couple of days in order to be able to fall asleep quickly when it was necessary, to promote the belief that he had gone without a bed for quite some time. He also skipped a few meals, and the smell of that soup was more enticing than he had predicted. Jack Crawford had warned him that his life would be uncomfortable for a while, and he would be eating poorly as well. The second part was untrue, Will was happy to discover as he ate the soup. Our Lady of Mercy must have quite a chef on board.

"Hot damn, kid," Crawford said when Will checked in with him before disembarking. "I barely recognized you. If I didn't know any better, I'd swear you were a vagrant or a camp-dweller."

Will removed his hat, tucking it under his armpit and shoving his hands in his pockets. "That's the idea, sir," he said in a shaky voice, looking at the floor and performing for Captain Crawford the role he was about to take on. "I'm just looking for some place to rest my bones."

Crawford laughed and pulled the boy against him in a fatherly side-hug.

"I knew it," he said. Will Graham was surprised to feel a bit touched by how proud he sounded, by the strength of his arm around his shoulder. "I don't put my faith in just anyone. You're gonna help me land 'im aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," he replied.

Father Lecter's rectory was small even for one person. It made Will feel ever more intrusive. His bedroom was just large enough for the single-occupant trundle bed, a three-foot space to the side where the cupboard could pull out, and a simple dresser in the corner. Despite its utilitarian size, Father Lecter had made it home. He'd hung small paintings featuring light-contrasted religious figures and scenes. His Bible sat on the dresser along with a narrow piece of purple silk drapery held in place by a single candle. The trundle cupboard was full of heavy blankets to be added on top of his bed in the winter, or handed out for anyone needing another.

Father Lecter pulled out the cupboard and began to remove the blankets. He put down two to cover the wood panel in place of a mattress, and then left one folded for a pillow, and draped another on top. It was a veritable bed.

“It’s not much, but...”

“It’s enough for me,” Will interrupted. “Thank you so much, Father. I haven’t had a good night’s rest in days.”

It was the truth, although in a different context than he allowed the priest to believe. He was glad that he’d put off sleeping in preparation for today, otherwise he’d have to feign fatigue and pretend to be asleep. Now he felt as though he could drop where he was standing and doze on the hard stone floor.

“Well,” Father Lecter said, picking up the spare blankets and carrying them out of the room, “Let me show you where you’ll be working and then you can sleep for as long as you need. I have to warn you, though, I don’t go to sleep myself until very late. Bit of a night owl. I like to go for long walks when it’s dark, to reflect.”

“I can’t imagine you’ll wake me,” Will said. “I sleep like the dead.”

Father Lecter grinned from behind his pile of blankets. Will followed him.

“Head to the sanctuary, I’ll be with you in a minute.”

Will walked into the open sanctuary, looking over the stained glass windows that brought in faint, refracted light. Father Lecter’s pulpit stood as a wooden monolith on a raised platform at the head of the congregation area. His eyes moved to a couple of buckets sitting in the far left corner. He walked over, studying the ceiling above. Sure enough, it was patchy and dark with water damage. He was relieved to have something beneficial to do for the church while he was there. It made taking up space and eating much-needed food seem less of a slight against them.

Father Lecter returned with a young, dark-haired man in overalls but no undershirt. The man, more of a boy, really, trailed behind the priest closely, like a loyal and protective dog.

“This is Matthew Brown,” Father Lecter said, “Matthew, this is Will.”

Will extended his hand and Matthew eyed him for a moment before accepting the shake.

“Matthew came to me under similar circumstances as your own, Will,” the priest explained, “Looking for work and shelter. What was it, a year ago?”

He looked at Matthew for clarification.

“Nine months,” Matthew corrected.

“Yes, that’s right. Anyway, Matthew has offered to help you with your task, which I see you’ve already discovered.”

“That’s great, Father,” Will said, trying to appear cheerful to the boy, whose direct, unflinching eye-contact was beginning to make him uncomfortable, “I could really use a hand.”

“But first, get some rest. You can both get started in the morning, before services begin.”

“Yes, Father,” Matthew said. Will could see the deference in the boy’s face and hear it in his tone. It was the language of someone who had been rescued and given something that he hadn’t expected but desperately needed. That was the language he needed to imitate, for the person he was portraying, as Father Lecter pointed out, had come here under similar circumstances. The boy’s youth probably added to it, but his affection for the priest was profound. Will was very curious to hear his story. That could wait for another day.

Will walked back to the rectory, beginning to feel the full effect of sleep deprivation. His eyelids burned and he felt his muscles tingling, desperate for rest.

“Are you going to be all right?” Father Lecter asked as he watched him head to the bedroom.

“Oh yes, thank you, Father,” Will murmured. “I just need sleep.”

He crawled into the bottom bunk that was more of a large open cupboard drawer full of blankets. He was barely able to pull one over his shoulder before he fell asleep.

Father Lecter poked his head in to check, and heard the sounds of heavy breathing, saw the movements of his chest beneath his dirty undershirt. Will’s hand had rested on his neck in a self-soothing gesture. The priest smiled.

Chapter 4

The night came as a relief to everyone in Oklahoma City, rich or poor. The difference was how it affected their escape from the blistering dry air. The rich stayed indoors, lounging in front of their new air-conditioning units, sipping ice tea or refreshing cocktails. When the angry sun fell, bringing with it tens of degrees of punishing heat, they flocked outside to see shows and go dancing. The noise of the revelry almost carried its way to Bricktown. In the tenements and shanties along the river, the only way to gain any relief was to sit out on the roofs and fire escapes and porches, hoping for a good breeze. Their interiors were like brick and wood ovens. Heat enough to sap all of the moisture from a body and leave a person delirious and sick. When night fell, they could finally head inward. The factory workers and day laborers brought their exhausted bodies back to their homes and the housewives and children were able to cook and do laundry without fainting. In fact, in the open air of Oklahoma, blown dry by the dust storms, night became almost chilly much like it does in the desert regions of the Southwest. That left the streets of lower-class Bricktown quite barren.

In a hobo's camp by the river, the man in the red bandanna took a swig of cheap underground moonshine before knocking his head back and belching loudly at the moon like a howling wolf. He laughed to himself, no one there to be amused by his crude joke. He murmured and kicked at the dirt for a moment before standing and walking to the riverside. Sniffing, he opened the front of his trousers and began to piss into the river. The stream of urine splashing in the water broke the silence around him. Suddenly he shifted, feeling as though he was being watched. He quickly tucked himself away and turned to face a man he hadn't heard approach.

"Oh, hello Father," he slurred. "God bless and all that fuckery."

He began to push past him when Father Lecter put a hand on his shoulder. The man looked up at the priest, startled for a moment, then irritated.

"I ain't got no use for no scriptures tonight, Father," he said, then laughed, "Unless you got one of them whores of Babylon hidden under your robe, that is."

Father Lecter's placid expression remained unchanged, but the hobo's face dropped and his mouth formed a gasping "O" shape. The priest's hand had tightened on his shoulder, pinching the nerve. He let out a soft moan of pain and began to stoop.

"Times are hard," Father Lecter said, his voice as steady as before; chilling in its impassivity. "People are starving. Good people, who deserve to live. While you go walking about, with flesh on your bones and organs inside of you that are wasted by your selfish, filthy existence."

"Father," the man croaked, trying desperately to pull the strong hand off of him.

"I am not your father," the priest hissed, face darting forward with each word. The hobo collapsed to his knees in front of him, ready to beg for release.

“Be grateful,” Hannibal continued, not letting up on his painful clutch. “For once you had no value in this world, now you will be sustenance for the needy. Your body will be broken, your blood spilled so that they might live. You can finally redeem yourself and become like Christ.”

With that, Father Lecter brought out a straight razor and slashed open the man’s throat. The red slit widened, emptying hot blood that appeared black in the moonlight. It soaked the bandanna at his throat as he gurgled and finally fell over to the ground.

Hurried footsteps approached as Father Lecter continued to look down upon the pitiful wretch. Matthew Brown brought a large burlap sack, pulled it over the head of the corpse, and helped the priest lift it over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes.

Matthew walked quickly in front of Father Lecter as they made their way into an abandoned warehouse. He unlocked a door to concrete steps descending into darkness, and then lifted a flashlight above his head so that Father Lecter could see.

The priest carried his burden to a table and dropped it heavily onto the surface. He brought a satchel of knives and cleavers out of his robe.

“I can’t imagine his liver would be of much use,” Father Lecter sighed, “nor his kidneys.”

Matthew Brown stifled a chuckle behind the back of his hand. Father Lecter grinned but clucked his tongue at him.

“But,” he continued in an optimistic tone. “There’s still a lot of meat here.”

Chapter 5

Will did stir a bit when Father Lecter entered his bedroom. The priest had changed into his nightshirt in the rectory office, so as not to wake him. It was the wee small hours of the morning, and the young man had been sleeping since mid-day. *Poor boy must be completely exhausted*, Father Lecter thought. He quietly crawled into bed from the foot of it, trying not to rustle the lower bunk. He was tired as well. Hacking up a body into parcels of meat takes a lot out of a man.

He glanced down over the edge of his bed at his new roommate. Will had rolled onto his back with a soft whimper and lie with his body twisted a bit and his head turned to one side. His hand rested over his chest, his soft eyelashes fluttering over the tops of his cheeks for a moment and then growing still. Father Lecter watched his eyes slide back and forth beneath their lids, and then rolled over and fell asleep himself.

“Hey,” a sharp voice pierced through Will’s dreams, dragging him out with it. “Hey, what’s-your-name... Will.”

Will sat straight up in bed, nearly smacking heads with Matthew Brown.

“We got a roof to fix,” the boy said, moving backward.

“What time is it?” Will groaned. His head ached from too many hours of consecutive sleep.

“6:00,” Matthew said. He fidgeted impatiently. “We only have a couple of hours to work before services start.”

“Sorry,” Will said, running his fingers through his severely cow-licked hair.

“Do your beauty routine later,” Matthew teased.

“Matthew...” Father Lecter’s scolding tone emerged from the office.

A tight-lipped grin covered Matthew’s face as he glanced at the open door.

“If he needs more sleep, you can work on it after church,” the priest continued.

“No, no, I’m awake,” Will called out. He rolled up on his knees and stepped out of the trundle cupboard. His undershirt was stained with sweat from sleeping in the heat of the day. He sat down on Father Lecter’s bed, pulled his boots on and laced them.

Matthew walked ahead of him at a brisk pace and with a swaggering gait. He had one hand tucked in a pocket and the other snapping its fingers with manic energy.

“I assume you’ll be attending Father Lecter’s service?” he asked, turning his head back over a shoulder at Will.

“Uh... yeah,” Will decided. He was struggling to tuck his undershirt into the waistband of his overalls and keep up with his pace at the same time. Attending service would be worthwhile. It could help him scope out more of the community citizens.

They headed outside into a pleasant morning that hadn’t heated fully from the risen sun just yet.

“You won’t see as many sitting in the pews as you saw in the lunch line,” Matthew snorted, lifting a ladder and placing it against the exterior wall. He climbed up it just as quickly as he had walked there.

“I suppose not,” Will replied. He was slower to climb than his partner. Tools and materials were already up there, covered in a tarp which Matthew slung back.

“But the cupbearer did not remember Joseph. He forgot him,” Matthew recited.

Will squatted on the roof, looking up at the boy and his glinting raven-like eyes that were trained on him persistently. Either he had never been taught how to converse with people without setting them on edge, or he simply didn’t care.

“Are the people in the shelter expected to attend service?” Will asked.

Matthew’s way of speaking was as intense and charismatic as a big-tent revival minister’s.

“Give a shepherd’s care to God’s flock. Do not lord authority over those entrusted to you, but be examples to the flock.”

“I like that,” Will murmured, studying the torn tar and mushy rotten wood in front of him.

“You read scriptures?” Matthew asked, cocking his head, raven eyes still trying to find Will’s.

“Can’t say I’ve done much reading at all in my life,” Will answered. He grit his teeth and reached into the hole to pull out leaves and muck. “Let’s tear away this crumbly area,” He instructed, pointing at the rot.

Matthew obeyed with a strange eagerness. He started pulling and hacking away at the weak, unusable fragments of roof, a smirking grin creeping over his mouth.

“I read a lot,” he said after some time.

“I imagine this isn’t where you thought you’d end up,” Will replied.

“This is the best possible place I could end up,” Matthew said, stopping his work and fixing his eyes on Will’s to indicate no trace of irony. Will only looked at him, silent. Matthew began tearing away bits of roof again and continued, “Father Lecter is... he’s a real father to me. He’s taught me more than my father ever did.”

“You seem pretty close to him.”

“I’d do anything for him,” Matthew added.

“Where were you before you came here?”

Matthew began to ramble on about growing up in rural Oklahoma. His pa was a gambler and his ma took in laundry for the neighbors. Occasionally Will would glance up at him or nod and mumble a response. The boy was odd, and turned out to be quite the chatterbox. But Will was glad of that. It kept him from having to come up with conversation, and the ever-intense tone of his voice was invigorating. Also he was a very fast worker, and was quick to obey any instruction Will gave him.

Suddenly he looked up, eyes narrowing as people began to wander up to the church.

“Work is done, brother,” Matthew said. It was the first time he had issued any order to Will since he’d barked him awake that morning. “Let’s get washed up and get ourselves to church!”

Will smiled at his nearly immediate air of familiarity. The two of them gathered the refuse they’d torn away into buckets, covered the hole and tools with the tarp, and climbed down the ladder. Or rather, Matthew Brown climbed halfway and jumped the rest.

“We’ll use the washroom in Father Lecter’s rectory. He has a bath,” he glanced over at Will and wrinkled his nose a bit. “You could use one.”

Will lowered himself into the hot water and sighed. It felt good to remove the grime he’d covered himself in a day before. He leaned back and dunked himself under the water, lying beneath the warm surface for a moment. He heard a muffled thump travel to his ears and sat up again, wiping his hair out of his eyes.

“We got some clean clothes for you,” Matthew said, putting them on a chair by the tub. Will looked at him in surprise, but tried to recover quickly. “Also I got a shaving kit.”

Matthew removed a couple of razors, handed one to Will, and took a glob of shaving cream in his hand before passing that off as well.

Will began to work the cream over his face and Matthew thrust a hand mirror toward him.

“Thanks,” Will said. He began to scrape away the three-day stubble he’d accrued.

“How long you think it’s going to take us?” Matthew asked, seemingly unaffected by the nudity of his partner. He stuck out his chin at the mirror above the sink and began to shave as well.

“It’s pretty bad,” Will sighed, but was actually very relieved when he found out that the job would take him a while. “The beam on that part of the roof took some damage. It’s getting weak. Dangerously, I’d say. It will have to be replaced.”

“The whole beam?” Matthew turned to look at him and Will resisted the urge to move his hands over the water and cover himself.

“Afraid so.”

Matthew started to chatter on about once when the roof came down on his pa's house. By the time Will finished shaving, Matthew had already done so and was completely changed into a white cotton shirt and slacks with suspenders. He was sitting on the edge of the tub, running a brush over his Sunday shoes.

"You are slower than blackstrap molasses stuck to a frozen pole," he remarked.

Will couldn't help but laugh at his bumpkin expression.

"Come on, get dressed!" He tossed a towel at Will, who had to drop the hand mirror into the tub to keep the towel from landing in the water. He stood, wrapping the towel around himself, but as Matthew sat back in the chair, still chattering, he gave up the attempt at modesty and just dried and dressed himself. His outfit was nearly identical to Matthew's; stock charity clothing. He glanced in the mirror one last time and combed his wet curls back off his forehead before Matthew hustled him out and they made their way to the sanctuary just as organ music began to play.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

The song and cartoon referenced in this chapter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8b8isnhYMjg>

Will and Matthew ducked into the back row pew, which was empty. He looked around and confirmed that Matthew Brown had been right. The congregation was quite small in contrast to the long lines for food that wrapped almost around the block. However, those in attendance looked absolutely blessed to be there.

The organ song that had been playing came to an end, and another began. Will smiled with disbelief when he recognized the jazzy tune. The congregation broke out into cheery singing, clapping their hands, lifting them above their heads, stomping their feet.

You sinners, drop everything, Let that harmony ring,

Up to Heaven and sing,

Sing you sinners

Matthew was clapping and belting out the tune as well. Will joined in, but he couldn't help but remember the parody of the song he'd heard on a Bimbo the Dog cartoon played before a picture show. *You'll quail in your boots 'til we've picked up the noose. Swing you sinners!*

He clapped and sang while he eyed the worshippers, taking note of physical traits, watching their movements.

Just wave your arms all about, and let the Lord hear you shout!

Pour the music right out

And sing, you sinners

Again the words of the parody came to mind. *We'll stretch you like a giraffe, maybe cut you in half, just to give us a laugh. Swing you sinners!* One song an acceptance of personal guilt and rebuking one's own sin, the other a gleefully violent acknowledgment of the pleasures that come with inflicting punishment on others.

The song ended and the congregation applauded and put their hands on each other, saying "Praise the Lord" and welcoming each other on that Sunday morning. Will felt an even stronger desire to find out who was robbing some of them of their lives.

Father Lecter left the front pew and ascended the platform and everyone was seated. He laughed a bit as he approached the pulpit.

"Ah yes, that song is right," he said, nodding. "We are all sinners."

"Amen," they replied. Will saw Matthew nod and mutter "Amen."

"But!" Father Lecter continued, raising a finger and pointing it at them. The room went silent. "We are all sacred."

"Amen!" they all replied, clapping.

"You are all beautiful!" Father Lecter called out. "God has created you, and you are fearfully and wonderfully made!"

"Hallelujah!" a woman cried out and they all cheered at her outburst.

"She knows it!" Father Lecter said, pointing at the woman. "Bless you, sister."

Will felt an irrepressible smile spread over his face.

"And what will you do with what God has given you?" the priest asked, "With those beautiful brains, those beautiful hands, those beautiful bodies that the Lord has given you? Will you squander them? Will you use them to do ugly in this world? Or will you do whatever is in your power to show to the world how beautiful you really are? Will you add something to it that wasn't there before, or will you only take?"

The congregation fell silent once more. Will looked over at Matthew, who was leaning forward with his arms on the pew in front of him, chewing a fingernail and staring with those intense eyes at Father Lecter as he spoke.

"Now I know some of you are thinking, 'Father Lecter, I have nothing. I am poor. I am homeless. I have no family.' Or, maybe 'I have a big family, and so many mouths to feed.'"

Will knew that most if not all of the people in this room must be thinking exactly that.

"God doesn't need to send you deeper into poverty, brothers and sisters," Father Lecter explained. "Remember the widow from the gospels? Who gave only a penny... less than a penny, even?"

The people murmured in recognition of the Bible story.

“She was too poor to give more than that, but she gave what she could. She gave even though she had next to nothing. I’m saying to you, if you have no money, give a helping hand. If your body is not strong, give a smile and a word of peace. Give what you can, wholeheartedly, and you will have proven what your creator had in store for you. Otherwise, what reason do you have for living?”

After the sermon had ended and all of the attendants had filed out to return to whatever living they intended to do that week, Father Lecter approached Will and Matthew.

“I see you’ve made a new friend,” he said to Will, who grinned at Matthew.

“Those were some good words, Father,” Will said, “To people who needed to hear it.”

Father Lecter’s smile was warm.

“I’m glad my words have touched you, Will,” he said.

“And that’s some upbeat church music you got,” Will added.

Father Lecter laughed.

“Ah, that was Sister Bloom’s idea,” he said. “She thought our music should make people feel happy, encouraged.”

“You don’t like jazz?”

“Oh, I like all kinds of music, as long as it’s from the heart.” He answered then asked, “How go the repairs?”

Matthew spoke before Will could.

“He knows a lot about roofs,” the boy said. “He knows what to leave and what to cut away.”

“A valuable skill set,” Father Lecter replied.

“For instance, the beam,” Will pointed at the beam that was near the corner of the sanctuary ceiling. “It needs to be replaced, or it could fall.”

Father Lecter sighed.

“I had hoped it was less damaged than that. I suppose that’s what happens when something is left off for too long.”

“I can start patching up that hole now, but I’ll need a piece of lumber if I’m gonna make it safe.”

“Oh yes, we’re going to need it to be safe. The well-being of my flock is very precious to me.”

Chapter 7

Mid-day was hotter than ever. The fire escapes of every tenement were full of folks desperate for air, legs dangling barefoot. Children waded in the shallow points of the river, carefully avoiding broken glass and keeping their skin wet and cool. Matthew and Will opted to sit in the flatbed of the jostling Ford as they accompanied Father Lecter on his errands. He'd bought them Knee-High sodas from a cooler at the Woolworth's and they nursed the foamy-sweet drinks, occasionally lifting the chilled glass bottles to their faces and necks.

The last stop was the lumberyard, which smelled of sawdust and the pleasant faint burning smell that comes from saw-blades roaring through fresh wood. Will wore a clean pair of overalls, and like Matthew, left his undershirt off to keep cool. The denim bib hung loosely from his upper torso, venting at the sides. Picking up on people's behavior was his forte, so he did notice that Father Lecter was looking at him quite often as he and Matthew lifted the long beams into the bed of the truck. He was paying the manager, but his eyes kept glancing over toward him. He chalked it up to curiosity. He was, after all, a mystery come out of nowhere.

Father Lecter climbed into the truck and the two boys hopped in back. Matthew Brown propped his feet up on the beams and spread his arms out along the side of the bed. He called something out over the creaking of the truck's suspension and the roar of the engine.

"What?" Will asked.

"I said there's nothing out here but shanty towns and camps!"

Will nodded and took in the gloomy surroundings. The river that made its way up through Bricktown was deeper here, and the oppressive heat cooked up a musky smell from the huts and tents that littered the area. As they drove onward, Will's keen eye saw something beyond the crowded spots. A lone tent had been nearly knocked over and a stray dog sniffed around, digging through a knapsack. *People with little more than nothing don't generally leave their things lying about*, he thought. His eyes darted around, trying to memorize exactly where he'd seen it.

He and Matthew carried the beams in through the church and lay them alongside the wall.

"We'll want to put a bearing up then remove that old beam," he said. The boys set to work, as the priest lingered for a moment in the doorway, watching them.

"Father Lecter," Sister Bloom's greeting snapped him to attention and he looked down at her with an awkward smile.

"Yes, Sister Bloom?"

"I am planning on going out into the town and distributing these flyers for our church service to people in the local camps. Let them know they are welcome in our congregation."

“Wonderful.”

Will had noticed the pretty nun’s entrance and was keeping her in his periphery.

So this is the jazz enthusiast, he thought.

“The other sisters have their hands full, so I’m going to ask for volunteers to accompany me.”

“I’m sure they’d be happy to,” he said.

“Are you going out tonight?” Will asked, walking up to them.

“Yes,” Sister Bloom replied, looking at him carefully.

“Sister, this is Will Nance, he’s helping Matthew fix our roof.”

Will put out his hand and shook hers.

“Thank you,” she said, relieved to hear it was finally being fixed. “It hasn’t been raining much, but when it does...” She gestured her hands downward and made a rushing water noise. Her charming expression; lips puckered, eyes widened for emphasis, brought a smile to Will’s face. He realized he’d paused too long.

“Oh, ah... don’t thank me, thank Father Lecter,” he looked over at the priest and tucked his thumbs in his pockets. “He gave me a place to stay when no one else would.”

Alana smiled up at the priest.

“But, Sister,” Will continued. “If you don’t mind waiting a little while, I would really like to go with you.”

“Oh?” Father Lecter asked.

“I saw the camp out near the lumberyard earlier, and I felt... this urge, you know? To go back there, and let them know about your church service.”

Father Lecter glanced back and forth between Will and Sister Bloom.

“I know what it’s like to feel like you’re not wanted anywhere,” Will said. “Being a vagrant, a bum, feeling like people would rather not have to see you or hear you at all.”

Father Lecter’s face grew very solemn. The young man’s voice was humble, his head lowered, endearing eyes lifted upward, thumbs digging deeper into his pockets. He felt a strong urge to suddenly embrace him, to assure him of his place in this world. He only blinked and nodded.

“I came to service here and everyone was putting hands on each other and singing together, it was a real community. No one cared where anyone came from. I want to let the people in that camp know how good that feels,” he paused and then added. “If that’s all right with you, Sister.”

Sister Bloom was as touched as Father Lecter was.

“Of course, Will, we can go there,” she said, reaching out a hand and putting it on his elbow. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

He and Matthew worked a bit more on constructing a load-bearer. Matthew was talking to him, but his mind was on that lone camp-site. The image of the dog rooting through it kept flickering through his brain. He was grateful that he had an opportunity to head back there so soon. Hopefully it would remain until his return. There was something about it that set off his instincts in a bad way. Perhaps it was nothing but a bunch of junk, more litter alongside the river, but he had to take a look.

By the time Will climbed into the cabin area of the truck alongside Sister Bloom, he was itching to take off. The nun had brought with her parcels of personal supplies as well as candy for the children.

The sun was lolling over to the west when they reached the vagrant camp. Will handed out flyers alongside Alana for a while, keeping the lone camp off in the distance in his vision.

“Please come to our service, we’d love to see you there,” Alana’s voice chirped as he strayed away a bit.

“A gift from Our Lady of Mercy,” Will said, passing out parcels along with the flyers. “Everyone is welcome. The Lord loves us all.”

As soon as Sister Bloom brought out her bag of candy, she was surrounded by eager children. They pulled on her skirt and lifted their hands out, eyes eager for a luxury they didn’t often get.

“Thank you, Sister!” they cheered.

“We’d all love to see you at Our Lady of Mercy,” Will continued, steering his distribution in the direction of the abandoned camp. “You don’t have to have nice clothes, you don’t have to give anything, just come and worship with us.”

He shot a last glance at Sister Bloom, who had scooped up a little girl and was playing with one of her loose braids and smiling. Then he headed over to the camp.

The tent was all but collapsed, hanging from a lone pole. The contents of the tent had been dragged along the ground. He squatted and began to poke through the knapsack that he saw the dog working at. Amongst the clutter he found a tin of tobacco and a half-empty flask. He screwed off the top and sniffed the contents.

Can’t have been gone too long, he thought. Someone would have plundered the tobacco and booze.

He looked back at the larger camp. There was safety in numbers, a sense of community in a lifestyle that was otherwise very isolating and anxious.

Either you didn’t like people... or they didn’t like you. Probably both.

Will turned on his haunches and peered down at the river. In the mud, he saw a discoloration. He stood up and walked toward the spot. Hunching down again, he saw a few tufts of weeds spotted with red, and a darker tint to a sizeable spot. Next to it, indented in the mud, were two circular shapes.

On your knees, he realized. He stood and looked down at the dents. The blood had spilled around them. *Before you were attacked*.

A huge amount of blood loss, bit of splatter, most of it pooling in one spot. He looked down and imagined a man kneeling in front of him, looking up at him. He slashed his hand over where his throat would be and then watched him as he bled out. He looked over the edge of the river into the water.

No bodies were ever found, he reminded himself. *Where are you taking them?*

“Will?” he heard Sister Bloom’s voice calling out. He turned and quickly strode back to the cluster of tents further in.

Most likely a male victim, he continued to consider the scene, *too heavy for one man to carry*.

Will managed to dart around a tent in time for Sister Bloom to find him still nearby. They headed back to the church.

When they returned, supper was being served. He slipped away once more and walked down the street to the local pharmacy.

“May I use your phone, please?”

Chapter 8

Captain Jack Crawford watched as the photographer moved about with his massive folding camera, pointing at the patch to which Will Graham had directed. The young officer had described the scene in a hushed voice at the counter of the pharmacy. He spoke of the murder as if he had been there.

“It was an execution, Captain,” he told him. “He was on his knees for long enough for them to sink into the mud. The killers slashed him open and drained him like a pig.”

“Killers?”

“Unless we’re looking for a carny strongman.”

Crawford pointed the photographer to the river. The flash bulbs popped again and again and he felt a headache coming on. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Will Graham was right about this. He was sharp enough to sense the accuracy of his description, but could he convince others that a patch of blood in front of a hobo camp was enough to warrant a full-scale investigation?

“I need a body, Will,” he whispered to himself, wishing the young man was there. He was relying on him to be his entire task force for the moment. He looked across the river and noticed a young woman with bright red curls holding a camera of her own. An inquisitive expression crossed her face as she snapped a photograph of him and then walked away.

A couple of officers were wading up and down the river, prodding the bed with pokers, but Crawford knew it was a futile effort. Something else was being done with the bodies or one would have turned up by now. Officer Zeller approached with a pen and notepad.

“I asked around at the larger camp,” he said. “The vagrant who used to stay here was called ‘Bo’. Not a lot of love for the man. Hard to get along with, so he kept to himself.”

It was just as Will had predicted. Crawford thought about all of the missing person reports he had received in the last year. The only reason he had them was because someone filled out a report; friends and family. If Will hadn’t spotted the scene, no one would even know there was a victim. How many more people like that were gone, vanished into the dusty Oklahoma wind?

Will returned to the church in time to get in line for soup. Sister Bloom smiled when she served him a bowl.

“Thank you for helping me at the camp,” she said.

“Anytime,” he replied, flashing her a charming grin. “Whatever I can do to return the favor.”

He continued to glance back at her, smiling as he headed to the table. Matthew Brown’s hand reached out and grabbed him by one suspender as Will almost walked into a chair. He pulled

him down to sit beside him.

Will saw his new friend's smug sneer and laughed. He tried to be nonchalant when he looked back up toward Sister Bloom. Instead, he caught the gaze of Father Lecter. The man had a quizzical expression on his face, his head very slightly cocked to one side. Will decided to focus on his soup.

"You've been eager to help out," Matthew murmured to him. "Do you want to help the church, or do you just carry a torch for Sister Bloom?"

Will turned his face to him in a jerking motion, embarrassed. Matthew Brown put his hands up in reassurance.

"Not judging. I just genuinely wanted to know. A lot of people around here willing to stop by and lend a hand to the sweetest nun anyone ever saw. No harm in that."

Will pushed a carrot up against the side of his bowl, slicing it into a smaller bite.

"But if it's Father Lecter you want to help, we can have more to talk about than just, 'golly gee that dame is peaches'."

Will looked back up at the priest. The man's sharp cheekbones shined with perspiration, his lips moving softly as he issued blessings as well as food to the hungry folks.

"I want to help him," Will Graham said, almost as much to himself as to Matthew.

"You can see what I see, then," Matthew whispered, leaning closer. "I can tell."

Will watched Father Lecter serve the final person in line. The priest sighed, his chest moving with his breath as he smiled at Sister Bloom beside him, celebrating that they had once again brought enough food together for everyone.

"You can see God's chosen," he added.

After supper, Matthew immediately got up and walked up to Father Lecter and whispered to him. The priest put his hand on his back as they walked into the church. Will watched as Sister Bloom and a shelter resident began to gather up the dirty dishes. He started to stack up the bowls and spoons that were left at his table and then carried them into the kitchen to be washed.

A bit later, Will wandered through the halls of the church. He nearly bumped into Matthew as he emerged from the sanctuary. He looked frustrated. When he saw Will, he put his hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

"You should talk to Father Lecter," he said. His voice carried a sense of urgency. Will looked past him to see the confessional box that Matthew had come from. It occurred to him that they had been talking about him, but he did not know why.

"Unburden my sins?" he asked in a coy tone.

“Nothing in the world feels better, brother,” Matthew said, a thin smile creeping at the corners of his mouth.

Will headed toward the confessional as Matthew walked away. He slowly opened it and stepped inside.

“Will,” Father Lecter said on the other side of the screen.

“I...” Will began, “I haven’t gone to confession in years, Father.”

“It’s never too late.”

Will nodded.

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“Why don’t you tell me about where you came from,” Father Lecter said. “I can better counsel you, if I know something about you.” His voice was so soft, a natural murmur to it when he spoke.

He wondered what he should say. A good lie always contains a kernel of truth in it, so that seemed to be the best way to approach the situation. Tell the truth, until a lie is necessary.

“I grew up near New Orleans,” he said. “My pa worked on riverboats. My ma... died when I was a boy.”

“That must have been painful for you.”

“Yeah,” Will answered. “It was... lonely.” He leaned his head back, stretching out his neck.

“Living with only your father?”

“He didn’t have a lot of love for me,” he said. “My ma and I had the same illness. She died, I didn’t. I think he would have had it the other way.”

“Was he cruel to you?”

Will’s first instinct was to say no. To say that he did the best he could given the circumstances, that he taught him how to work and care for himself and that was worth something.

“He took the belt to me a lot,” he said, shrugging.

“Did you misbehave?”

Will’s face straightened and his eyes became far-focused. He realized he couldn’t remember why.

“I suppose so,” he said.

His mind tried to focus on particular instances, but it all came to him as a stream of events. Always knowing that the sound of leather pulling through denim brought pain; that it was better just to stay still. The smell of whiskey seemed to manifest before his nostrils.

“He drank a lot.”

“After your mother died?” Father Lecter asked.

“No.” Will said it with emphasis, his voice taking on a slight antagonism. “No, he was like that when she lived. He cheated, and he lied, and he drank.”

“So he lacked the excuse of grief,” Father Lecter said.

“He had no excuse,” Will said.

“Did you hate him?”

Will glanced at the screen. He could make out the profile of the priest on the other side. He was leaning close, his head tilted toward him.

And that's when I confess my sin, Will thought.

“Yes.”

“Did you wish him dead?”

Will twitched at the sudden leap the priest made.

“Isn't hating him sin enough?” he asked.

“That doesn't answer the question.”

Will shifted in his seat.

“Sometimes. The booze took him eventually anyway.”

“What brought you here?”

Time to lie.

“After he died, I heard that there was plenty of need for farmhands out here. Then the dust storms came, and there was nothing to farm.”

“What was it like for you in the city?”

“Misery,” Will said. “There are too many of us. People who need something and not enough of that something to go around.”

Will heard Father Lecter sigh. No one knew better than him that it was the case. For him, the swarm of needy must stretch out before him like a sea, his efforts barely able to keep back the tide.

“I see these people,” Will continued. He found himself instinctively heading back to the truth again. “And they are doing bad things. They steal, and peddle, and prostitute, but only because they are desperate. They aren’t bad people. I don’t want to see them pushed further down into the dirt because they tripped and fell.”

“But your father doesn’t fall into that category?”

“I have sympathy for people who trip into the dirt, not people who pull others down with them.”

He could feel the priest’s eyes on him; hear the sound of his breathing. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded deeper, more gravelly.

“You’re a good man, Will.”

Father Lecter returned to his bedroom very late again. Will was already asleep in his makeshift bed. He’d thrown off his blanket in a heat that was so heavy it hadn’t dissipated with the night. He was wearing nothing but flannel drawers, knees tucked up a bit in the fetal position. The priest had hung his cassock in his study but removed the remainder of his clothing in the bedroom, watching the boy breathe and twitch a bit in his sleep.

After he climbed into bed, he closed his eyes for a moment, relaxing his head on the pillow. Finally, he rolled over and looked down at Will again. He reached his hand out and brushed a stray curl off of the young man’s forehead, smoothing it over a damp temple. Will shifted a bit and licked his lips. The priest gazed over his lean shoulders, the curve of his spine, the way his ankles rested on top of each other. He swallowed and lay back again, closed his eyes, and willed himself to remain that way until he fell asleep.

Chapter 9

Will passed through Father Lecter's study on his way to the sanctuary. He'd managed to wake up on his own this time before Matthew Brown came for him. The priest was reading the paper.

"Good news, Father?" he asked.

"Is it ever?" Father Lecter replied. He glanced up at the boy. "No, apparently someone was murdered near the lumberyard."

Will feigned surprise and stepped behind Father Lecter to look at the paper.

"Is there a Ripper of Bricktown?" the title read, byline Freddie Lounds.

He couldn't stifle a scoff.

"Yellow journalism at its best," Father Lecter reacted. "I'll admit to having a weakness for it, though. Freddie Lounds spins a lurid yarn."

A source within the Oklahoma City Police Department states that several people in the Bricktown area have gone missing without a trace. Finally some evidence of a cold-blooded murder has been found. Could this be the work of a ripper?

Will furrowed his brow and wondered who that source could be. The attention this publication would bring to the investigation wasn't going to make things easier.

"It says no bodies have been found, only one patch of blood."

Father Lecter folded the paper and dropped it on his desk.

"Yes," he said. "One patch does not a 'ripper' make."

Will joined Matthew in the sanctuary. He was whistling a jazzy tune.

"You missed breakfast," he said as Will approached.

"I prefer sleep," he replied. The two lifted a support beam and hammered it snugly into place.

Will considered his words for a moment then continued, "Have you heard about the murder out by the lumberyard?"

Matthew stopped whistling.

"What murder?"

"They found an abandoned campsite with blood spilled in front of it."

“I hadn’t heard that, no,” Matthew responded. His glinting eyes became thoughtful. “Who died?”

“Some hobo,” Will answered. “They haven’t found a body.”

Matthew began to work again.

“Hobo life is dangerous in the city. Lotta folks will string a man out for a few nickels.”

“Are there a lot of murders around here?” Will asked. “The paper says there’s a ripper.”

Matthew laughed, his sharp boyish voice carrying through the sanctuary.

“Ripper? That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“No murders, then?”

Matthew’s crooked grin squinted up his eyes and he ducked his head under the support beam to give it a test push.

“People have gone missing,” he said. “But not anyone you’d ever want to meet.”

Will scowled.

“Why’s that?”

“Mean folks,” Matthew explained, “People who did nothing but cause trouble and pain.”

“You knew them?” Will asked.

“Every low-down person in this community comes to Father Lecter’s soup kitchen,” he replied.

When the boys took a break before lunch, Will decided to stop by the kitchen and offer Sister Bloom and Father Lecter a hand.

The priest stood over the wooden table, chopping onions into massive piles. Meat had been stewing in huge pots of liquid on the double-stove for hours. The room smelled of paprika and garlic and simmering pork. Father Lecter looked up at him, his hands still chopping as he said hello.

“Goulash today,” he told him in a cheery tone.

“It’s wonderful,” Sister Bloom silently mouthed to him as she walked by, carrying a large container of stewed tomatoes. Her hands and lower arms were stained from mashing them.

“Can I help?” he asked.

“You most certainly may,” Father Lecter replied. He gestured to a mountain of potatoes that two shelter residents were working on peeling.

Will picked up a peeler and got to it. He glanced up when Alana pulled another container of tomatoes out of the refrigerator. Piles of wrapped meat filled the upper shelves. They were labeled "Supper, lamb."

"How on earth do you manage to get so much meat?" he asked.

Father Lecter brought a pot over to where he worked, scooped up a hefty handful of onions, and dropped them in.

"My father was a butcher," he explained. "He had a lot of friends who were also butchers. They have been generously donating to the church on a regular basis."

"That's awfully kind of them, especially nowadays."

"He who sows bountifully shall reap bountifully," Father Lecter replied.

Will Graham smiled at the man as he leaned forward with the peeler and potato in his hand, elbows on the table, flinging out long brown and white strips into the bin.

After lunch was over and Will helped Sister Bloom and the others gather up the dishes, Father Lecter approached him.

"I want you to come with me," he said, "To bring leftovers to a family in town."

Will went along with him in the truck as they drove into a particularly poor district of shanty houses. They brought with them a crock of goulash, some bread, and some children's clothing.

Mrs. Dougherty sat out on the porch, washing linens in a tub with a scrub board. She stood up and wiped her rough, wet hands on her apron when Will and Father Lecter approached.

"Afternoon, Father," she said. Her eyes were ringed with lines. She hugged the priest and gratefully accepted the crock from Will. "Won't you come in for some coffee?"

They walked inside of the dark house. A little boy with his arm in a sling sat on the dirt floor, playing with a scruffy gray dog. Father Lecter sat at the table and waited while the woman brewed them each a cup.

"Hello," Will said to the boy, crouching down and petting his dog. The boy looked up at him, revealing a scabby cut across his cheek. It was swollen, causing one of his eyes to squeeze half-shut. "What's your name?"

"Danny," the boy answered. "This is R.J."

"Hello, R.J." Will let the dog lick his face. He watched as the boy bounced a ball against the wall, and R.J. loped after it.

"How have you been holding up, Mrs. Dougherty?" Father Lecter asked as she brought out the coffee. Will sat down with them and sipped from his cup, keeping an eye on the boy and

his dog. He noticed round, blue bruises fringed in yellow emerging from the wraps on his slung arm.

“Well enough, I suppose,” she said. “There’s always dirty laundry, and people willing to pay to get it clean. Lately I have been able to save it up, use it for things we need.”

“And how’s Danny?”

“His arm is healing,” Mrs. Dougherty said. “I can’t thank you enough for seeing him to a doctor. It would be in much worse shape if they hadn’t wrapped it up. And no way could I have paid for that.”

“You are very welcome,” Father Lecter replied. “Anything he needs, you be sure to let me know.”

Will was silent as he leaned against the window of the truck, waiting for Father Lecter to start the engine.

“Somebody broke that boy’s arm,” he said, finally.

“His father,” the priest replied.

Will gritted his teeth and strained the muscles of his neck and jaw.

“Where’s his father now?”

“Missing,” he answered. Will sat up and Father Lecter shot him a knowing glance. “Mrs. Dougherty is a member of my congregation. Her husband spent all of the money he earned, and all of the money she earned as well, on liquor and gambling and prostitution. He was... unspeakably cruel to his wife and his son.”

Not anyone you’d ever want to meet, Matthew Brown’s words echoed in his mind.

“He has been gone for a little over a week and already she has been able to earn her own money and her boy is healing,” the priest continued.

“It’s better that he’s gone,” Will said in a bitter tone.

“Yes, it appears that way, may God save him,” Father Lecter replied. He paused, glancing over at Will. “He wasn’t unlike your father, with his drinking and cruelty.”

Will squirmed, uncomfortable.

“Lot of people in this world who beat their kids,” he said.

Father Lecter sighed, a pained expression on his face.

“Yes.”

Will Graham slipped away at supper again to make a call to Captain Jack Crawford.

“I think this is the work of vigilantes, Captain,” he said. “The victims are people no one liked. These killers feel that they are ridding the world of undesirables.”

“What’s he doing with their bodies? Burying them?”

“Burial is a respectful act. If they can dispose of them or hide them without putting them in the ground, that’s what they would try to do. I think he’s stashing them, maybe in a dump site, or someplace abandoned.”

Crawford commanded every cop on the beat in Bricktown to keep an eye out for dumps.

“Zeller,” he ordered, “I want you to go through and ask questions about any abandoned lots or buildings in the area.”

“In Bricktown?” Zeller asked, leaning against his desk. “I might need some assistance. There are rows of abandoned warehouses in that area. Condemned by the city, but it costs money to demolish them, so they just stay empty.”

Crawford’s face straightened.

“All right, take two men with you and check out those warehouses.”

Chapter 10

Officer Zeller was growing tired. For the last couple of days he had wandered around the old warehouse district, poking through trash and sleeping vagrants. When he came to the squat building tucked behind a row of taller factories, windows sealed in with bricks like eye-patches, he was more than ready to call it a night. The floor spread out inside, cluttered with bricks and paper and old wood. He held up his flashlight, barely able to illuminate the fraction of area in which he stood. As he walked, nearly tripping over a cinderblock, the light fell on a metal door padlocked shut. He examined the lock, and the way the latch appeared newly attached. Placing his flashlight on the floor, he lifted the bolt cutters he brought with him and snapped it off with a grunt.

The concrete stairs descended into filmy blackness. He dropped the bolt cutters and pulled out his gun, gripping it tightly as he made his way downward, flashlight lifted above his head. As he wandered through the humid basement, a soapy smell filled his nostrils.

Lye, he realized. He walked past a large wooden table, shining his light over it. The smell was there, but not as harsh as what he was picking up. He darted the light around the room and noticed a pit in the floor. Checking his perimeter once more, he slowly ventured toward it. The concrete was smashed up in this area; rebar jutting out from the edges. He craned his neck over the precipice and looked down into a massive hole in the ground. When the light of his torch shined in he let out a cry.

Bones not quite stripped of their flesh lay tangled in a heap at the bottom. Sprinkled lye covered them, clotting with the blood. He moved his light around, catching the glimpse of a severed head, its face covered in lye looking like a frozen body in the snow, its eyes glazed over and staring up at him. Zeller stumbled backward, and ran up the steps toward daylight. He pulled out his whistle and blew it until he was winded.

Jack Crawford blinked in the lights that the force had brought in and was propping around the basement room. His eyes readjusted and he peered down the hole at the carnage below.

It is a ripper, he thought to himself. He pulled at his collar, dabbing the moisture at his neck. *The papers are gonna go mad.*

The police photographer snapped a picture, and as he surveyed his subject matter, he began to lose color in his face and focus in his eyes.

“You need a breath of fresh air?” Captain Crawford asked. The photographer shook it off and continued his work. “God knows I do,” Crawford muttered.

Father Lecter walked out of the churchyard, pulling on a douillette jacket over his clerical shirt. The night felt oddly damp.

“Can I join you, Father?” he heard a voice from behind him. He turned to see Will coming after him. He considered asking to be alone, but changed his mind.

“Certainly,” he answered.

“Where do you go on your walks?” he asked, trotting along with the priest’s long stride.

“To places in my memory,” he said. “Places in which I grew up.”

They passed the businesses near the church and headed into the tenement area. Laundry hung in heavy slopes between windows. They finally stopped in front of an old beige-colored building. It was dark and empty. A large rectangular spot of lighter beige, surrounded by copper bolts was above the door, indicating a sign had been removed.

“This is where I spent a great deal of my childhood,” he said.

Will observed the institutional structure.

“An orphanage,” he realized, voice somber.

“A home for boys, yes,” he replied. “My father was an immigrant butcher. He came to Oklahoma with my mother and me when I was very young. My baby sister was born not long after.”

“What happened to them?”

His face seemed to grow gaunter as he said, “A group of burglars came into our house and threatened my parents. I grabbed my sister, Mischa, before they saw us and hid in a cupboard.”

“A robbery gone wrong?”

“It hadn’t gone wrong,” the priest corrected. “They could have taken whatever they wanted. But what they also wanted was to kill.”

Will swallowed and stared at the lonely building, listening to Father Lecter speak.

“They were so cruel. I could hear them beating my father and mother, hear the noises they made when they stabbed them. Mischa started screaming and bolted out. I didn’t catch her in time. When she ran into the next room, they lifted her up and...”

Will’s eyes grew wet as he now stared at Father Lecter. He put his hand on his shoulder.

“Like they were slaughtering a rabbit,” he whispered, and then continued, “I closed the door to the cupboard before they saw me. It was days before someone found me, still hidden in there.”

“And you went to live in this home for boys?”

“Yes.”

Father Lecter started walking again, as if moving on from the place as he moved on in his story.

“Eventually my aunt and uncle came to the country to take care of me. They were kind, good people. They raised me in the church.”

“And now you reach out to help others,” Will said.

“I try,” Father Lecter replied. He stopped and looked at Will, examining his face. “I can’t abide cruelty,” he continued. “All have sinned, each in our own way, and God forgives us. But cruelty, that is... unspeakably ugly.”

They walked some more, past the tenements and near the warehouse district. Will brooded, hating himself for how he had lied to Father Lecter. Would he understand if he were to confess that sin to him right now?

“Father,” he said finally, “I need to tell you something.”

The priest turned and looked at him, his eyebrows raised. Will noticed lights off in the distance, amidst the warehouses. He spied police vehicles surrounding a building and a crowd had gathered.

“Yes?” Father Lecter asked. He looked at where Will’s eyes had wandered and saw the commotion. He paused, but turned back to face him, unaffected.

“Or... ask you something,” Will stammered. “I wanted to know if I could take the day off tomorrow and go into the city? I heard a rumor there might be some work there.”

Father Lecter’s mouth opened a bit, and his eyes seemed to dart over him for just a moment.

“That would be fine,” he replied. “Do you need a ride?”

“No, I can get there on my own, thank you.”

The two of them headed back to the church. It was very late, for Will, anyway. He went to the bedroom and began to undress. He turned back to see Father Lecter standing in the doorway, watching him.

“Ask Sister Bloom if she would pack you a lunch tomorrow,” he said, his voice hushed. “I’m sure she would be happy to.”

Will nodded. He stood still while Father Lecter returned to his study.

As he slept, Will dreamed that he was a small boy again, in an orphanage. He felt afraid, but he didn’t know why. He tried to herd the other children into a closet to hide. A crashing sound came from outside, and it steadily grew closer and louder; a man screaming obscenities. Suddenly, the closet door opened up and he found that he was alone. All the other children had disappeared. A hand shot in and grabbed his arm, twisting it until it snapped. He cried as he was dragged out.

“Will...” a soft murmur woke him. There was another noise, that of his own whimpering. He opened his eyes in the darkness. He felt a hand still on his arm, but only rubbing it tenderly.

He looked up to see Father Lecter had crouched down in his cupboard drawer with him. His nightshirt hung loosely from his neck.

“What’s wrong?” Will said, sitting up straight, looking around the room.

“You were having a nightmare,” Father Lecter reassured him. “You were screaming.”

Will rubbed his face with his hands.

“I’m so sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be.” The priest lowered himself to his knees and kept his warm hand on Will’s arm, rubbing it. Will turned his head toward the hand, watching the priest’s fingers move over him, up to his shoulder. He felt his head being cradled and brought to the man’s chest. Then he felt his lips on his forehead. He looked up at Father Lecter, eyes widened. The man’s face was close to his own, his hands holding his head lovingly. He stared at him, mouth parted slightly. Slowly he moved the angle of his head so that his lips brushed against Father Lecter’s. The second they touched, the priest moved back suddenly.

“Sorry,” Will said again. His eyelids were heavy. He closed them and cringed, eyebrows knitting.

“Go back to sleep, Will,” Father Lecter whispered. Will lie down and drifted off again.

When Father Lecter climbed into bed, he once again watched the boy sleep. He let his hand dangle off the edge, reaching out to him but resisting the urge to touch. He realized that as soon as a spot opened up in the shelter, he would have to make sure Will got that spot. He couldn’t share a room with him any longer.

Chapter 11

Officer Zeller stood watch with other police outside of the warehouse, keeping the gawking crowd of citizens and reporters at bay. He spotted the woman with the fiery red curls and walked over to her.

“You again,” he said.

“They say there’s a slaughterhouse in the basement of that building,” she responded, tucking her camera under one arm and fumbling with a pen and notepad. “Is it true? Is there a Bricktown Ripper?”

Zeller rolled his eyes.

“Why would I tell you anything after you leaked what I said to that Freddie Lounds character?”

“Oh,” she said, pausing her scribbling to look up at him. “I am Freddie Lounds.”

“Your parents named you ‘Freddie’?” he asked, disbelieving.

“It makes it a lot easier to get published,” she said with a chuckle.

“All right then,” he grimaced. “I have nothing to say to reporters.”

“Don’t you think the people of Oklahoma City deserve to know that they might be in danger?” she called after him as he walked back to his post.

Freddie began to write some more, describing the scene outside the warehouse and detailing the rumors that were floating around in the crowd. She glanced up to see a young man in a white cotton shirt, slacks, and suspenders walk directly up to the front door. Officer Zeller came forward, with his hand up, then stopped and ushered the man through. She gathered her camera up.

“Watch out,” Zeller muttered, pointing at Freddie. Will hustled into the warehouse just as her camera snapped.

The basement smelled exceedingly foul as investigators lifted the remains out of the pit and laid them out on the ground.

“Will!” Jack Crawford called out. “I am sure happy to see you.”

Will nodded grimly.

“I was hoping I’d get here before the scene was disturbed.”

“We took some photographs.” Crawford handed him the photos and he began to thumb through them.

“Unceremoniously dumped,” Will said. “I figured as much.”

“And hacked to pieces,” Crawford added. “We’re going to have to bring people in to identify severed heads. What a mess.”

“Those who have people to identify them,” Will remarked.

“I’ve sent officers to question the neighbors of people who were reported missing. You were right about them being generally ‘undesirable.’”

Will crouched to examine the pieces of body.

“Most of the flesh has been cut away,” Crawford said. “Lots of skin fragments, heads, genitals, random organs. Other than that, the bones are stripped nearly clean.”

“Mutilation like this is time-consuming,” Will said. “He wasn’t hacking them up for better storage or mobility.”

He pointed at a mess of intestines.

“Look here. He specifically cut the bowels out, taking care not to rupture them.”

“Why is he doing this?” Crawford asked.

“He’s turning them into pieces. Dehumanizing them,” Will stated. “To him, they are not human and shouldn’t be treated as human after death. Now they are just a pile of parts.”

“Is he doing it for sport?”

Will shook his head, standing up.

“He hated them, Captain,” he said. “He’s not doing this for fun.”

Will glanced over the pieces once more, eyes falling on one severed head in particular. A red bandanna was still wrapped around his stump of a throat. Will pointed at him.

“I’ve seen that man,” he said.

“Where?” Crawford asked.

“In the soup line at Our Lady of Mercy, the day I arrived. He was... very rude.”

“Rude?” Crawford chuckled. “Compared to the descriptions I’ve heard of the other missing people, that’s pretty amiable. We’ve got pimps, child abusers, wife beaters... real vermin.”

“Swing you sinners,” Will said aloud, staring into the dead man’s eyes.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing,” he muttered. Then he looked up with a startled expression. “Captain, I think one or both of the killers might have been in the same line with me.”

When he awoke the next morning, Will had the feeling he'd been dreaming again. He pulled on his work clothes and walked into Father Lecter's study. The priest was sitting at his desk, reading the paper again.

"Good morning, Will," he said, fanning out the paper on the desk for him to see.

"Lair of the Bricktown Ripper discovered, by Freddie Lounds," it read.

Will stood behind Father Lecter, peering down at it.

Officers carried out multiple pieces of victims butchered by a truly heinous killer, who remains at large.

"Well I'll be damned," Will mumbled.

"How goes the roofing?" Father Lecter asked.

"We've replaced the beam, and taken down the support wall. Now we just have to patch up that hole."

"That's great to hear."

His tone didn't sound pleased. Will remembered the night he comforted him in his bed and straightened his back.

"And after that is fixed," he asked. "What then?"

Father Lecter glanced over his shoulder at the young man. He smiled.

"I'm sure we can find something else for you to do around here."

Will returned his affectionate gaze.

"Thank you, Father."

Father Lecter broke away and asked, "Did you enjoy going out into the town and visiting people?"

"I was glad to do it," Will responded.

"And seeing Mrs. Dougherty," the priest continued, "How did that make you feel?"

"I... felt..." Will thought for a moment. He chewed his bottom lip. "I felt great pity for her, and her boy, Danny."

Father Lecter nodded.

"And how did you feel about her missing husband and Danny's father?"

"I thought he could go right to hell, if you don't mind my saying."

Father Lecter sniffed a laugh.

“I do not know if Mr. Dougherty is in hell. Perhaps he is still alive. Perhaps he fell victim to this ‘ripper’ but was absolved before his death.”

“Only God could absolve a man who steals from his wife and breaks his own son’s arm.”

“That is true,” Father Lecter replied. “But we must all understand our role in God’s plan. Seek absolution, before it is too late.”

“Amen,” Will said.

Father Lecter pushed the paper aside and Will sat on the edge of his desk, his thigh brushing against the man’s arm. He saw him looking at him, not moving his arm away, letting it touch him.

“Do you think your father sought absolution, before his own death?” Father Lecter finally said.

“I doubt it.”

“Does it comfort you, the thought of your father being damned to hell?”

Will flinched.

“No, in actuality, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“Neither would I,” Father Lecter replied. He stood up, stretched his back, and then looked directly into Will’s eyes, his face inches away from the boy’s. “Some people will never save themselves. By God’s grace only can they be saved.”

Freddie Lounds wandered around the interior of the warehouse in the very early morning, trailing a tail of smoke from her popping flash bulbs. All of the macabre had been removed, leaving only the empty pit with a protective fence set up around it. Still, the scene carried with it a dreadful sensibility. The pooled blood had stained the bottom of the pit, and the smell of lye would linger for long after the events of yesterday. She moved quietly, knowing that several officers had been ordered to patrol the area for the Ripper’s possible return.

She heard an officer revisit the front of the warehouse, and in a startled moment she stepped on a patch of broken glass.

“Who goes there?” he called out. She tread carefully to the window that she’d crawled into and slipped through to a sky that had not yet broken with dawn. She walked off toward the river until she spotted something out of the corner of her eye. It looked like a memorial set up in a ditch far away from the warehouses. Freddie shot a glance toward the building she’d climbed out of, watched for police, and then walked toward the object. As she approached, she could see that the ditch was more of a trench, quite deep. It wasn’t until she had nearly reached it that she could see, as the Sun’s rays began to stretch along the base of the Oklahoma City skyline, a human head. Hands shaking, she gripped her camera and moved closer.

Planted into the dirt at the bottom of the trench was a wooden cross with a man nailed to it, a crown of flowers on his head and great chunks of muscle and flesh sliced from his body. Freddie lifted her camera and snapped a photograph, the bright flash illuminating the ghastly open wounds and the porcelain whites of his eyes.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

In this universe, Will hasn't fully used his empathy yet so it's a new thing for him.

“The body is missing most of its flesh and a few organs; the heart, kidneys, liver, just like the bodies we found in the warehouse basement.”

Captain Crawford led Will to the crime scene. Officer Zeller was standing by, writing notes. Other officers kept civilians well away from the area. Even so, Will wore an ivy cap pulled low over his eyes. He had told Father Lecter he was job searching again.

“The killers wouldn’t have had a lot of time out here in the open,” Crawford explained. “Which is probably why the body is still relatively intact.”

“Good work Zeller, for finding the body dump,” Will said. “I never congratulated you.”

Zeller grinned and said, “We only knew where to look because of what you told us.”

“Have the bodies been identified?” Will asked.

“Most of them,” Zeller responded.

“A Mr. Dougherty?”

“Yes, I remember,” he answered. “The wife came in to identify the head. She was crying for a moment, but then spat on him. Spoke volumes.”

Will cleared his throat and looked away.

Crawford asked, “How did you know where we needed to look, Will?”

“I considered for a moment that I was the killer and I committed these crimes. Then it was simply a matter of predicting my own next move.”

Jack Crawford studied the young man, his chin pressed against his collar.

“Will, I want you to do that again, right now.”

They approached the crucifixion. Will took in the wooden cross, the white flowers of the crown, the nails driven into the flesh of the man’s hands.

“If their bodies must be discovered, then they may as well speak their true intentions.”

“They’ve made a public mockery of this man.”

Will let his eyes travel over the victim and shook his head. “I don’t think they’re mocking him.”

“You said he, or they, hate their victims.”

“They don’t want to,” Will said. “They’re attempting to transform their hate, just as they transformed him.”

“The flowers are a nice touch.”

Will gestured to it and said, “White flower wreaths symbolize the purity of the dead.”

“None of the victims have been especially pure,” Jack retorted.

“They wanted them to be.”

“Will, think of ‘they’ as ‘I,’” Crawford said, curiosity on his face. “If you had done this, tell me why.”

Will closed his eyes. He began to breathe slowly as he pictured an empty cross lying at the edge of the ditch. He imagined himself nailing the body to the cross, hoisting it up, and planting it deep into the dirt.

“I acknowledge you as a martyr and depict you as such,” he said.

Crawford watched Will silently. He mused that the young man looked somewhat like a Buddhist monk meditating.

“I have cut away your heart and other vital organs. I have stripped your body of its flesh, and left only a carcass behind. You are not your body any longer.”

He reached out and placed the flower crown upon the corpse’s head. He smiled lovingly. The eyes opened and stared back at him, speaking silently to him.

“This is my body, which is broken for you,” he whispered. “Do this in remembrance of me.”

He opened his eyes and looked over at Captain Crawford. He appeared a bit shaken for a moment, but recovered.

“What did you see?” Crawford asked.

Will heaved a sigh then uttered, “Transubstantiation.”

Crawford looked bewildered.

“The things they cut away from this man. They’re not refuse. They have some kind of purpose. What’s left behind is not the important part, Captain.”

Will made it back to the church in time to help Father Lecter in the kitchen. He was cooking a lamb stroganoff.

“You may slice the mushrooms for me,” he said with a weak smile.

Will sat at the table and picked up a paring knife. He began to cut each mushroom from the pile a shelter resident was brushing clean.

“How goes the job search?” Father Lecter asked, whisking a creamy sauce in a large pan.

“Nothing yet,” Will answered. “There isn’t a lot of extra work to be done in the first place, and people are afraid to hire strangers because of the murders.”

Father Lecter’s shoulders slumped a bit.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I’ll find something,” Will reassured him. Father Lecter nodded his own reassurance and kept whisking.

“Mrs. Dougherty’s husband was among the deceased,” he said. “I went to visit her today.”

Will looked up from his work.

“How is she holding up?”

“She is shocked, but soldiering on.”

“And Danny?”

“Danny is...” Father Lecter’s voice was strained as he spoke, “a young boy, grieving his father. He’s frightened and confused.”

He put the saucepan down on the stove and turned to face Will. The young man could read the pain on his face.

“His injuries are healing well,” he added.

“He will survive this,” Will said. He fumbled with a mushroom, its tender body crushed by Will’s efforts.

Father Lecter came up behind him and leaned down.

“Here, let me show you.”

He took a mushroom in his hand and sliced it expertly. Will watched his deft fingers as they demonstrated for him what to do. He tried to imitate it, enjoying the shadow of Father Lecter’s frame hovering over him and the smell of soap and a hint of sweat at the collar of his clerical shirt. The priest put a hand between Will’s shoulder blades and let him take over, still

watching him. His touch felt heavy but reassuring. The shelter resident looked up at them for a moment, and then glanced away as Father Lecter returned to his saucepan.

That night in heavy sleep, Will found himself hanging from a splintery cross. He looked over himself in panic, seeing long nails driven into his hands, blood pouring from the wounds. He looked down and saw that his body was little more than a bloody, flesh-spotted skeleton packed with organs. He screamed, but the sound of it seemed to be crushed by the heat of the air around him.

Standing before him was a sea of people. Their eyes were filled with condemnation. A figure approached, covered with a massive black shroud that draped over his head and reached his feet. He slid forward like a ghost. A hand reached out from the folds of the shroud and pulled Will's still beating heart from his chest. Then, the figure bent down and handed the heart to Danny Dougherty.

"No, no, no!" Will cried out in breathless gasps into something that muffled him like a gag. He was in darkness again, shaking and crying. He felt heavy arms wrap around him and a soothing voice tickling his ear.

"Ssh... ssh... it's okay Will," the voice said.

Will realized his gag was actually the rolled blanket that he had pressed his face into.

"You're safe, Will, it's okay, just a dream."

Will blinked. He was still shivering, but the body that embraced him was holding him still, pressing his arms at his sides. He began to relax.

"Father..." he croaked.

"You had another nightmare," Father Lecter whispered. He lay behind him in his cupboard drawer, cradling him tightly but with a calming tenderness. Will turned his head to the side to look at the man's eyes. He was resting his jaw on his shoulder, and Will's face brushed up against his, lips and nose nuzzling his cheek.

Father Lecter began to loosen his tight embrace.

"You were thrashing violently," he explained. "I was afraid you might hurt yourself."

Will grabbed hold of the priest's arm before he could release him entirely. He pulled it back over him like a blanket, urging him to keep holding him. Father Lecter obliged, and surrounded Will's body with his arms once more. Will kept his face turned toward the man, moving his head up and down, nudging his firm jaw with his nose. He pushed back into him, nestling his hips into the enclave of Father Lecter's.

He heard the priest's breathing, could feel his body reacting to him. He began to slowly but persistently rub his bottom against his groin. It swelled in response and the priest clutched his hands around opposite sides of Will's body like a straitjacket. He didn't move, only held Will in place, pinning his arms down and letting him gyrate his hips against him. He could feel his

cock sliding up against the cleft of his ass through thin flannel drawers; then a dangling hand barely free enough to clutch at the fabric of his own nightshirt.

Will began to whimper, softly at first, but then more audibly as he pushed against him, urging him to do the same. The priest felt as though he had frozen. The grip of his arms was growing tighter, his jaw began to clench. Will's fingers moved over the nightshirt, steadily crumpling it in his fist and lifting it up over Father Lecter's thighs. He started to roll over, and the priest loosened his grip on him to let him face him. Will's hands made their way into Father Lecter's drawers and wrapped around his cock. He began to stroke it rubbing his own groin against him and kissing his jaw and neck.

Father Lecter closed his eyes, unable to do anything but hold onto the boy as he allowed him to fondle him. He grunted in response to the soft urgent noises the boy made. He couldn't look at him, even in the dark, but the memory of his face hovered behind his eyelids. He saw his long lashes fluttering against the tops of his cheeks when he slept, the boyish curl at the edge of his lips, the charming way he put his hands on his own throat and collar, begging to be touched. All he could do was keep his arms around him in a circle, images of him floating in his brain as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Father?" he heard him whisper. His tone was meek, and as suppliant as the day he first met him. He grew ever closer to the edge, the boy's hand working over his cock, pulling tight the seams of his underwear. He felt a wet spot in the fabric against his thigh where Will was rubbing himself. He put his head back when fleshy lips began to move over his jugular, kissing and nuzzling him into euphoria.

"Father?" he asked again, voice stronger now in the darkness. Finally, Father Lecter looked at him. The boy's eyes met his, questioning and imploring him. The priest moved a hand downward and began to stroke him as well. The sound of grateful moans that emerged from Will's throat made his own breath quicken and shudder with excitement. He felt the boy's body quiver as he humped up against him, moving along with the motions.

A desperate whimper, a firm kiss on the throat, and a bout of spasms, then Father Lecter felt the moisture on his hand. He wrapped his arms around the boy once more and pumped against his hand until he found release.

All was quiet, and both clutched onto each other in the pile of blankets until they found sleep.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning: contains reference to sexual abuse of minors (aka these people are the worst).

When Will awoke, Father Lecter was gone. His paper sat unread on his desk. It was just as well, he thought. The events of last night were making him wonder how they would interact from here on out.

“I’ve never seen as fast a learner as you,” Will remarked to Matthew as they sat on the roof of the church, patching up the hole. The boy had taken to carpentry like a duck to water.

“I listen,” Matthew answered. “Tell me how to do something once; I don’t see why I need to be told again.”

Will smirked and continued putting down shingles.

“You pay attention to people,” he said.

“So do you,” Matthew replied. He looked up at Will, his crooked grin dimpling his cheeks. “I see you watching people.”

He tapped his temple.

“I see that noggin working.”

“I just find people interesting,” Will explained.

“We are very alike, you and I,” Matthew said. His voice was still boyish as ever but it took on a steady quality. His glinting eyes searched for Will’s.

Will offered him a glance.

“I believe that’s true,” he agreed.

“You and me, and Father Lecter,” he continued. He spoke slower now, the intensity of his tone like static electricity.

Will stopped his work and looked at him.

“Father Lecter,” he repeated.

“Is a shepherd amongst wolves, Will,” Matthew said. “He needs all of the help he can get.”

“Especially now, when the community is so afraid,” Will remarked.

Matthew sat back on his haunches. He inhaled deeply as a breeze skirted over the roof.

He said, “Someone needs to tell these people that they don’t need to be afraid.”

“There’s a murderer on the loose,” Will stated.

“Who is being murdered?”

Will nodded and said, “Child abusers and low-lives.”

“That’s right,” Matthew answered. “They don’t need to be afraid, unless they know they should be afraid.”

Will lay down another shingle and began to hammer.

“And they that should be afraid,” Matthew continued. “Well I have no sympathy for them.”

“Some folks are better off dead.”

“No one really dies,” Matthew said. “The time we spend on this earth is like controlling a puppet on a string, waiting for the time when we can drop those strings, come out from behind the curtain, and take a bow.”

Matthew dipped his head and spread out his arms with that comment and Will snickered.

“But,” Matthew said, setting back to work. “Some folks seem dead-set on wasting it.”

Matthew put down his own shingle and nailed it into place.

“We are not this flesh and blood,” he continued. “The life we inhabit flows in and out of us. All God wants from our earthly forms is that we give back.”

Sister Bloom called from the ground, “Will! Father Lecter would like to speak to you in the sanctuary.”

Will directed Matthew to continue and climbed down. He made his way around the church and into the sanctuary. A tarp hung from the hole in the ceiling, catching all the debris. Father Lecter was looking up at a stained glass window, his hands folded in front of him. When he heard Will approach, he sighed and led him to the silent corner in front of the confessional.

“A bed is opening up in the shelter. I’m reserving it for you.”

Will looked at the priest.

“You don’t want me to stay with you anymore?”

The muscles in Father Lecter’s neck strained. He kept his hands folded in front of him, knuckles growing white.

“What I did last night, Will, was unacceptable,” he said.

Will huffed and looked over his shoulder.

“You are a young man, in a desperate situation, and you felt pressured to do as I guided you.”

“No,” Will said, shaking his head.

“I took advantage of you and for that... I am so very sorry.”

“I knew what I was doing,” Will replied.

“I don’t want you to feel as though you must cater to me in order to secure housing and food. I didn’t mean to imply that, but I didn’t stop. You will have a place to stay, and you can feel secure in that, I promise you. I won’t use my position over you anymore.”

“No,” Will said, coming closer. Father Lecter stepped back, away from him. “No, I want to stay. I want to stay with you.”

Father Lecter looked deeply ashamed.

“You are a compassionate, affectionate young man. I wanted to show you love, and I abused you.”

“I’m not naïve,” Will snapped. The expression on Father Lecter’s face made him soften his tone. “I didn’t want you to stop.”

He suddenly stepped forward and pushed against the priest, kissing him.

Father Lecter put his hands in the boy’s soft curls. Will pushed against him and Father Lecter moved backward into the confessional. He shut the door behind him and kissed him hard, until the priest sat down on the bench. The young man dropped to his knees between Father Lecter’s legs, unbuttoning his cassock and pressing his body up against his groin.

“Don’t think of me in that way,” he insisted. “I’m not trying to ingratiate myself to you. I want to help your church, I want to help your people, and I want to love you.”

Father Lecter put his hands on Will’s head. He kissed him on the forehead.

“I can’t,” he said. He stood up again and walked out of the confessional. “It wouldn’t be right.”

That night Will waited up for Father Lecter, but the hours ticked away and eventually he couldn’t keep his eyes open anymore. He climbed up into the man’s bunk and dozed off.

In another part of Bricktown, a woman cried. She sat on her knees in a deserted alleyway.

“Please don’t do this.”

Matthew Brown looked down at her, holding the straight razor in his hand. His raven eyes peered through hers, unflinching.

“You forced your own children into prostitution,” he said. His voice was slow and eerie.

“I just needed to get by,” she pleaded. She gasped and tried to reason with him saying, “I couldn’t let them starve!”

Matthew Brown squatted down, bringing himself eye-level to her.

“You didn’t debase yourself; you didn’t put yourself in harm’s way. That would be understandable Mrs. Holdrege. You made your children do it for you.”

“I will stop,” she cried desperately, looking over at Father Lecter for his intervention. “Father, I will change. I just need help.”

Father Lecter stood silent a few feet away from Matthew. His hands were clenching and unclenching at his sides, face stoic.

“What you’ve done, Mrs. Holdrege,” Matthew said with a touch of lilt to his voice, “Is beyond the capacity for human reason. Your chance at this life has ended.”

He stood up again, placed a gloved hand under chin, and lifted her face upward. He readied the razor. Mrs. Holdrege sniffled, unable to speak through her fear.

“Do it quickly,” Hannibal murmured, stepping up behind him. “We don’t want to cause needless suffering. Across the artery, just like I showed you.”

Matthew nodded.

“But your treachery against the human race ends with it,” He continued, placing a hand on her head. “In death you will bring nourishment to others. You will have purpose.”

He slashed the razor across the woman’s throat. She slumped forward and he held her by the hair while she bled out.

Father Lecter picked up a wooden box filled with wrapping paper and his satchel of knives. He and Matthew set to work quickly on removing her flesh and organs. When all had been parceled, they posed her. Matthew removed his bloody gloves and threw them into the box. They began to walk away, but he stopped and looked back. The eyes of his first kill stared after him. He walked back again quickly, brushed his fingers over them, and closed the lids.

Father Lecter returned to his room and stopped short in the doorway when he saw Will curled up in his bed. He sighed with exasperation, but then smiled. He began to climb into the lower cupboard, but his own bed with this sweet boy in it looked so inviting. After some personal struggle, he climbed up into the bed and spooned up against him. Will twitched a bit and mumbled in his sleep, but as soon as Father Lecter put his arm around him he nestled against his body and was still.

As Will awoke, the sun through the windows felt warmer than the typical morning. He sat up straight and looked at the clock on the wall. It was past noon. Matthew hadn't even bothered to wake him. He walked into Father Lecter's study in just his drawers and stood sheepishly in the doorway. Father Lecter looked up and tried to hide the grin that spread over his face when he saw him like that; curly hair wildly messy, eyes squinting in the light, nearly naked except for the thin, clinging fabric of his underwear.

"I slept in," he confessed.

"So did Matthew. I considered it myself," Father Lecter replied. He eyed Will over his cup of coffee. "Someone stole my bed last night."

Will snorted and laid his head against the doorjamb.

"In hindsight, that seems rude," he said. His eyes were shining, despite heavy sleep.

Father Lecter licked his upper lip thoughtfully and glanced down at the newspaper laid out in front of him.

"That opening in the shelter I promised you is not available anymore."

Will straightened up.

"Oh?"

Hannibal gestured at the paper and said, "Two young children have just lost their mother. They're coming to stay with us for a while."

Will strode forward and lifted the paper.

"Bricktown Ripper Claims Another Victim."

Chapter 14

“This one wasn’t crucified. The killers propped her up against this wall on her knees and set her hands up on these bricks,” Captain Crawford pointed out. “Same flower wreath, same mutilation, except that the breasts were left intact, and the womb is spilling out onto the ground.”

“She’s posed in the fashion of St. Perpetua and St. Felicity,” Will said. “Perpetua was breastfeeding her infant and Felicity was pregnant when they were martyred together.”

“We asked around about her,” Zeller said. “Her neighbors thought she might be prostituting her children.”

Will cringed.

“And no one decided to report it?”

“We’re living in a strange social economy, Will,” Captain Crawford muttered. “Not just a financial one. People are unlikely to inform on their neighbors, even for situations as severe as this.”

“They are coming to stay at Our Lady of Mercy,” Will said. “Maybe now they’ll find some peace.”

“Tell us what else you see, Will,” Crawford said.

Will closed his eyes and let himself breathe. The thoughts of the mother abusing her children sickened his mind, but he let them through.

“I’ve likened you to the mother saints, despite your utter failure as one.”

He watched himself cut away the flesh of the corpse.

“I’ve taken your corrupted body away, to be transformed. What is left of you can finally attain purity.”

He lowered the wreath onto her head, and reached out to close her eyes.

“You are not this flesh and blood. All God wants from your earthly forms is that you give back.”

He looked down to see a slab of meat in his hands.

Will’s eyes snapped open. He realized whose words he had spoken.

“It’s a payment,” he told Crawford. “The organs and flesh, are an actual ‘pound of flesh,’ as payment for their wrongdoings.”

“They took more than a pound,” Crawford sighed, staring at the grotesque scene.

“She had a lot to pay for,” Will replied. He thought for a moment then asked, “Why are her eyes closed?”

Jack scowled and realized, “The other victims’ eyes were open.”

“For some reason, the killers felt the need to shut her eyes. Make sure they’re examined in the autopsy room.”

The supper line had ended but Will was not hungry. He caught Matthew in the halls of the church and pulled him aside.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said,” Will whispered, “About helping Father Lecter.”

Matthew’s eyes gleamed and he cocked his head. Will continued.

“He truly is a shepherd, and this town is full of wolves. Wolves like Mr. Dougherty and Mrs. Holdrege.”

“Wastes of flesh and bone,” Matthew cooed.

“I couldn’t agree more.” Will moved closer, keeping his voice low. “Someone has been doing this community a mighty favor.”

“I’m so glad to hear you say that.”

Will locked eyes with him.

“I know it was you,” he said.

Matthew leaned against the wall, resting his head back but maintaining eye contact.

“Father Lecter is a gentle spirit,” Will continued. “He can heal these people, but he can’t protect them. He needs people like us to purify the flock.”

“People like us?” Matthew asked, grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“We are very alike, you and I.”

“It isn’t easy, taking a life,” Matthew warned. “It changes you.”

“The lives you took were not really lives at all.”

“They weren’t,” Matthew agreed. “You’re right. They were walking abominations.”

“You made them beautiful.”

“You can help me, Will,” Matthew said, bowing his head to whisper in his ear. “You can separate the wheat from the chaff.”

After they separated, Will rushed to the pharmacy on the corner and asked to use the phone.

“They examined the eyes, Will,” Crawford said on the other end. “They found a fingerprint. The killer must have taken his gloves off before shutting them.”

“A last-minute urge,” Will said.

“But why are you calling me?”

Will swallowed. The words he was about to speak tasted like bile in his mouth.

“I found you a suspect to go with those fingerprints, Captain. His name is Matthew Brown. He’s a resident at the shelter.”

Will returned to the kitchen to help clean up supper. He needed something to do, anything to occupy his mind. He stood beside Father Lecter, drying off the dishes that he had scrubbed clean. Sister Bloom was sitting at the table with the Holdrege children, playing hide the cherry with three overturned teacups. She spun them around quickly and they giggled as they tried to guess which one hid the sweet treat. He thought he could hear the sound of feet rushing in the back of his mind. He could sense Jack Crawford coming.

When the noise broke out, Will felt as though he would collapse in a heap on the floor. He staggered after Father Lecter and Sister Bloom as they went to investigate.

Matthew Brown was in handcuffs, being led away by Crawford.

“Matthew Brown, you’re under arrest for the murder of...”

Will felt a buzzing in his head. He hung back in the doorway, deathly afraid of those raven eyes finding him.

Father Lecter rushed forward and Matthew Brown called out, “It’s all right, Father! I accept responsibility for what I’ve done. Please... take care of Bricktown.”

The priest’s eyes were stricken with pain as he watched them lead Matthew into the back of the wagon and drive him away.

“Matthew...” he choked.

Sister Bloom’s hands were planted over her mouth. She was shaking.

“They’re wrong... they’re wrong, Father...”

Chapter 15

The silence on the church roof was nerve-wracking. Will almost considered talking to himself as he finished patching up the hole on his own.

“I want to stay on a bit longer,” he had told Captain Crawford over the phone. “I am nearly certain he had an accomplice.”

“He’s saying he acted alone, and his fingerprints are the only ones we’ve found,” Crawford said. “But we’ll keep working on him. Let us know if you see anyone suspicious.”

He sat down and clutched his knees up against his chest. He hadn’t slept well the last couple of nights. The nightmares were becoming worse, not better.

He dreamt of Matthew bowing on a stage. His arms and legs were attached to long strings that reached high into the loft of the theater.

He heard Matthew’s voice say, “The time we spend on this earth is like controlling a puppet on a string, waiting for the time when we can drop those strings, come out from behind the curtain, and take a bow.”

Will looked up, stretching his neck to see into the darkness above, but could not see who held the strings.

He awoke alone in the dark. He could see the light from Father Lecter’s study reaching in from under the door. Sometimes he could see the shadow of the man pacing. He longed to get up and walk in on him; coax him into bed, to be comforted after his bad dreams, and to offer comfort. Instead he wriggled up against the edge of his cupboard and tried to sleep.

At lunch, Will aided Sister Bloom in carrying out the pots to the crowd. Her smile had hardened into a thin line. The fingerprints had matched and Matthew had confessed. She could no longer insist that there had been a mistake.

“How are the Holdrege children?” Will asked her between utterances of “God bless” to the people in the soup line. Sister Bloom’s affection for children was the only distraction he could think of at the moment.

“I can already tell they react to kindness with a certain discomfort,” she said, “Almost a suspicion.”

“That’s understandable.”

Sister Bloom nodded. A tear rolled down her cheek and she rubbed it away with her sleeve.

“I thank God they are here now, even though it may be too long coming.”

She glanced up and groaned. Her attempts to stifle crying caused her throat to sound half-closed.

“That reporter again,” she moaned. “She was here yesterday, bothering people for information.”

Will looked at where Sister Bloom’s eyes were cast. It was the woman with red curly hair who he saw at the body dump. His jaw went slack for a moment. Freddie Lounds must have sensed she was being watched, for she turned and looked straight at him.

“I’ll get the next pot,” he mumbled to Alana, ducking his head down and returning to the kitchen.

That night, Will dreamed that he was rebuilding the church. Matthew was with him and Father Lecter stood by watching them work. They lifted the supporting beams and nailed them into place. He reached out to Matthew and the young man handed him a hunk of flesh. He didn’t recoil, but set it down along the support structure. Together they built the wall with flesh, limbs, and organs as brick and mortar. Will stood back and stared at the church they created. The walls dripped with blood, the ceiling gleamed with gore in the sunlight, and in the steeple a human heart hung like a bell.

Will opened his eyes and shivered in the darkness. He reached out for Father Lecter, but again he wasn’t there. A light came on in the office and he could hear shuffling and see the shadow of feet through the crack under the door. Finally Will rose to his feet and went to him.

Father Lecter bore the strain of every hour he hadn’t slept the last couple of days. He leaned over his desk, examining each word in the newspaper as though he hadn’t read the article before. He barely even registered that Will had walked into the room. When the young man’s hand rested on his shoulder he twitched and looked up at him suddenly.

“Hello, Will,” he murmured.

Will glanced at the paper. *Bricktown Ripper in Custody, by Freddie Lounds*, it read.

“You shouldn’t be reading that,” Will said.

“I can’t stop myself.”

Father Lecter’s voice was hoarse. Will reached out and lowered the paper to the desk. The priest turned in his chair to face Will. The pain in his eyes caused an ache to burrow into his stomach.

“They won’t let me see him,” he said. “They won’t let anyone see him.”

“Eventually they will,” the young man reassured him. “Every man deserves a priest.”

“Matthew deserves a better one than I.”

Will scowled.

“He couldn’t have a better one.”

Father Lecter cringed at those words and turned back in his chair.

“I failed him completely.”

“How can you say that?” Will asked. “None of this is your fault.”

The priest swallowed and shook his head, eyes focused on the middle distance.

“Everything he did, he did for me, because he wanted to help me.”

Will knew he was right. But, how could he have known these were the measures he would take?

“There is darkness in him, Father,” Will replied. “But what is light; that is because of you. Don’t take responsibility for the darkness.”

“Matthew believed he was a shepherd keeping the wolves at bay. Now he is the sheep amidst wolves.”

Will nodded.

“You can still help him,” he said.

“I must.”

“When are you going to allow yourself to sleep?” Will asked.

Father Lecter released a half-hearted chuckle. He rubbed his eyes.

“I can allow myself sleep, but that doesn’t mean it will come.”

Will dropped down to his knees and began to untie Father Lecter’s shoes. He pulled them off and put them by the desk.

“I will, I will,” Father Lecter insisted, standing up. He passed Will to head to the bedroom.

Will stopped him and began to unbutton his cassock. The priest stood still and watched while the young man took away the cassock and hung it up like a diligent altar boy. Then he unbuttoned his clerical shirt, and pulled the collar away from his neck.

“I’m sure I can manage,” he whispered, but found that he had no desire to stop him.

Will loosened the priest’s belt buckle and lowered his slacks. Father Lecter stepped out of them, leaning against Will for support. When he’d undressed him, he led him into the bedroom.

Father Lecter lay down on the bed. As Will climbed in with him, he put his hand up.

“Will,” he said.

Will ignored him and pushed himself under the covers with the man.

"I can't intrude upon your life as I have Matthew's," Father Lecter explained, pulling away from the warm body spooning up against him.

"I'm in control of my own faculties," Will remarked. He put his arm around him and kissed and nuzzled his shoulder.

"I've opened a door with you," Father Lecter murmured.

Will pressed up against him, letting his hands wander over his body under the covers. The priest lay back unmoving and stiff again, his eyes closing, letting the boy touch him but not acting himself. When he felt Will's lips trail down his belly, and press over the swelling bulge in his drawers, his mouth hung open and his tongue was pressed against the back of his upper teeth. Visions of the boy traipsed behind his tightly shut lids, but he didn't look at him as he lay in bed with him.

"Father," his voice emerged; the same coaxing, pleading whimpering voice as before. Father Lecter cleared his throat and grunted. It was the closest he could bring himself to asking him to continue.

He felt the weight of the young man flop down beside him and he opened his eyes. Will was gazing down on him, head propped up on a hand.

"It's a two-way door," he whispered.

Will threw back the covers and pulled off his own drawers. Then he lay on his back, hand resting on his own collar, caressing it with his fingers in self-soothing movements. Father Lecter looked over his body. His lean frame touched with sweat, his stretched neck and sharp jaw-line, the beautiful angles of his collarbone and shoulders, the movement of his chest and belly as he breathed, the twitch of his semi-erect cock. He couldn't resist putting his hand in the boy's hair, petting him. When Will looked back at him with wide, imploring eyes, he couldn't resist kissing him either.

Father Lecter pulled off his own underwear and stood on his knees over Will. He brushed the back of his knuckles over the boy's torso, lingering over his nipples, his belly button, and the dark patch of pubic hair above his cock. He felt a buzzing sensation overcome him when he saw it react, stiffening and rising to his touch. He felt a soft hand begin stroking him. Then Will's head lifted from the pillow as he rolled forward and Father Lecter felt a wet mouth wrap around his own erection. A startled moan escaped his lips, and he dug his fingers through soft, curly hair. The young man began to suck, and Father Lecter's hips moved with each stroke of tongue and lips. He looked down at the beautiful boy, his mouth stretched open over his cock, his eyes rolling upward toward him, his nostrils flared and quivering. He pulled his cock out of the eager mouth and the boy gasped and lay back again, spreading his legs and lifting his hips slightly, begging to be touched.

He moved between his legs and positioned his hands under his knees. Will licked his fingers and slid them between his legs, probing himself. The priest lifted Will's knees and the sound of the boy's breathing grew louder. He watched him finger himself as he brought his knees

upward, spreading him wide open. Will's other hand reached out for him, stroking his cock, coaxing him toward him.

Father Lecter pushed his weight down on top of him, propping the young man's legs over his shoulder and pinning them to his chest. He kissed his lips before guiding his cock inside of him. Will moaned, bit his lip, and squinted his eyes, wet lashes fluttering.

"I think you do have an innate desire to please," Father Lecter murmured in his ear, easing into him slowly.

Will nodded and tried to keep his voice low. He clutched at his own throat with one hand and stroked his own cock with the other. When Father Lecter began to move in and out of him, his moaning and whimpering could not be controlled.

"Then how is this not taking advantage of you?" the priest asked. His voice was guttural and breathless.

"Because," Will said between quaking moans, "I need this as much as you."

The words encouraged him, and he thrust deeper, collapsing on the young man's body, cradling his head in one hand, raining kisses down on his face and neck. He took Will's hand away from his own cock and stroked him himself. As his semen spilled out over Father Lecter's hand, his body began to spasm and his hole clenched around his cock. The priest groaned loudly and he emptied his own seed inside of him.

Father Lecter released his strong grip on the boy's legs and moved to one side, his hand still cradling the head, his lips still pressed against his neck. He slept for the first time in days.

Chapter 16

The sound of the door slamming open broke Will out of sleep. He sat up to see Father Lecter standing in the doorway. The grim look on his face startled him. His immediate thought was of Matthew Brown.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, reaching for his clothing. He heard the rustle of paper and a light pat as it landed on the blanket in front of him. Will picked up the newspaper, glancing up at the priest. Father Lecter said nothing, just stared at him with fierce eyes.

He opened it and saw the headline, by Freddie Lounds. It read, *Catching the Ripper*. His eyes moved over the text quickly until they fell on this line:

The most brilliant snare the police department used was one Will Graham. Going undercover as a vagrant named Will Nance, the brave officer managed to befriend the suspect and...

Will felt a cold grip penetrate his chest. He looked back up at the priest, his eyes wide, head shaking.

“Why are you still here?” Father Lecter hissed. He turned and walked away.

“Father!” Will stumbled out of bed and hurried to get dressed. He followed after him.

The priest turned back with a suddenness that stopped Will in his tracks.

“Get your things and go.”

“Father Lecter, wait...” he called after him. He looked to his side to see Sister Bloom hovering in the doorway to the kitchen. Her mouth was open, her eyes darting over him with disbelief.

Will tried to explain to her what he wanted to explain to Father Lecter, but realized he lacked the words. He had deceived them all, Matthew most of all, and now it was time to make his exit.

When Will returned to the police building, dressed in his uniform once again, he was surprised when his fellow officers stood and applauded for him.

“The man who snared The Ripper!” Zeller called out, pouring some whiskey into a tumbler and handing it to the man.

Will shook his head, but gratefully accepted the drink. He knocked it back and the room cheered louder. The officers approached him one by one, clapping him on the back, but he only grimaced and nodded.

“Where is he?” he asked Captain Crawford.

“In the holding cell, for now. He’ll be transferred as soon as we’ve gotten all the information out of him.”

Will stiffened. He was in this building with him. Only a door and a short hallway separated them.

“We still don’t know what he’s doing with the parts he cut away,” Crawford continued. “Maybe he’ll talk to you. Maybe he’ll see you and clam up even worse than before.”

Will put the tumbler down on a desk and walked toward the holding cell.

“No time like the present,” he muttered.

As Will approached the cell, he could see Matthew’s arms hanging through the bars. His head was resting against them. When he stood in front of him, Matthew looked up. At first his face registered surprise, and then a broad, tight-lipped grin crept over his face.

“Officer...” he said in a slow but friendly tone.

“Hello Matthew,” Will replied. He pulled a chair forward and sat.

“I was right about one thing,” Matthew continued. His voice creaked with a cheeky lilt. “You are a hunter. I was only wrong about who you were hunting.”

Will stared back at him, giving him the eye contact he was always craving. The boy’s eyes glinted with curiosity and he cocked his head.

“Now I see you, and you see me,” he cooed.

The officer shook his head with a dry smile.

“I only see a fraction of you, Matthew,” he replied.

Matthew stood straighter, letting his head loll back, still keeping his dark eyes trained on his visitor.

“Why don’t you help me fill in those blank spaces?” Will continued.

“I’m an open book,” Matthew told him, opening his arms and gesturing at himself.

“Not to everyone,” Will corrected him, “Only to people who are like you. When you thought I was a kindred spirit, you wanted me to help you.”

“Are we kindred spirits, Officer?”

“In a fashion. Tell me, Matthew, who was already helping you?”

“No one helped me, I acted alone.”

Matthew leaned his head against the bars again. He looked up when Will stood and approached the bars.

“You couldn’t have stripped those bodies of their flesh and organs in the time you did without help.”

“You always said I was fast,” Matthew teased.

“You couldn’t have easily carried the bodies to the warehouse by yourself.”

“I never claimed it was easy.”

“I’m sure the Captain, and your lawyer, has already informed you,” Will said, “that turning in your accomplice could mean the difference between life in prison and the gallows.”

“Yes, they did.”

“And you would die for your accomplice, who will most likely be caught in the near future?”

A light in Matthew’s eyes seemed to flicker and Will thought he could hear the boy’s voice in his head say, *He will never be caught*.

“You were never really in charge of this situation, were you Matthew?” Will asked. “This accomplice of yours was the experienced one, you just went along.”

Matthew’s dimples etched lines at the edges of his mouth.

“I don’t have an accomplice.”

“Are you afraid?” Will asked. He looked at the boy’s shining eyes and placid expression.

“No.... you’ve never felt braver.”

“I face the consequences of my actions. None but God can judge me.”

Will’s thoughts passed over the faces of the people in the shelter. Matthew was not sociable. He could think of no one he’d seen the boy so much as exchange words with.

“You feel noble,” Will continued. He moved closer to him, nearly touching the bars himself. Matthew did not step back, persistent grin in place. “You are protecting this person. Someone you would do anything...”

Will’s eyes widened. When Matthew saw the expression on his face, his grin dropped.

“Father Lecter,” Will whispered.

The light in Matthew’s eyes was extinguished.

“Leave him out of this,” he said. “He didn’t know what I was up to.”

Will nodded continuously as he went on.

“You aren’t the Bricktown Ripper, Matthew.”

“I beg to differ.” Matthew tried to maintain the steadiness of his voice, tried to replace his nonchalant grin, but the twitching of his skin betrayed him.

“You were helping the Bricktown Ripper. A man you revered, whose moral superiority you deemed impeccable.”

Matthew laughed.

“You are reaching, Officer,” he said. Wetness was growing along his eyelids.

“Father Lecter taught you everything he knows.”

Will felt his own skin twitch over his arms and legs. He backed away from the cell. As he did, he saw the bodies of the Ripper victims flash in his mind. The way he had looked at them, viewing their flesh as a sacrament, sending them off to their resting place. It fit more snugly now than ever before. He stumbled down the hall.

“Will!” Matthew cried out. “Please! Do not do this!”

Will looked back. Matthew was leaning through the bars, face pressed against them, reaching out for him.

“Don’t take him away from them!” he pleaded. “He is their only hope.”

Will exited the holding cell room and returned to Captain Crawford.

“Did he tell you anything?” Crawford asked.

Will tried not to tremble as he shook his head.

“No,” he croaked. “He just messed with me.”

What am I doing? The question persisted as he returned to his own home for the first time in weeks. It continued to ring through his thoughts as he tried to sleep.

When he finally lost consciousness he found himself standing in front of the church. The Sunday bells were tolling, but no one was entering the building. He walked inside, and made his way to the sanctuary. Father Lecter stood at the front in his cassock. Matthew was on his knees in front of him. Will felt a current pulling him forward, and he approached the priest.

“What will you do with what God has given you?” Father Lecter asked. Will fell to his knees beside Matthew and gazed upward. The priest held out a communion wafer and Will opened his mouth.

“This is my body, which is broken for you,” Father Lecter said, placing it on his tongue.

“Take, eat, do this in remembrance of me.”

Will’s eyes snapped open in the daylight. He sat up.

“Transubstantiation,” he said aloud. He fumbled for his clothes. *What kind of transubstantiation.*

He imagined the chunks of flesh that had been butchered away from the bodies. Suddenly, the image of the church refrigerator door opening flashed in his mind.

It's literal.

Will felt his stomach lurch and he clapped his hand over his mouth.

He's feeding them to the people.

Chapter 17

Father Lecter walked slowly toward the end of the hall. Captain Crawford had finally allowed Matthew Brown a visit from his priest. The boy's face erupted in a broad smile when he approached.

"Father!" he exclaimed.

The priest approached the bars and put his arms through, embracing him.

"I didn't tell them about you," Matthew whispered.

"You have to," Father Lecter replied, touching his forehead to Matthew's and gripping his shoulders firmly.

Matthew pushed back.

"Why?" he asked. "The people of Bricktown need you. You can't leave them now."

"They're going to hang you," Father Lecter croaked. "Your only salvation is to give them my name."

"I already have my salvation, Father," Matthew replied. "It's the only one I need."

The priest shook him by the shoulders and said, "You are going to tell them that I made you do these things. You are going to say that you were afraid and that you were not responsible for your own actions."

"You are no use to anyone dead," Matthew insisted through grit teeth. "You still have people to lead, people to save."

Father Lecter shook his head, eyes welling with tears.

"I can't let you do this, Matthew," he said.

"What will happen to the shelter if you are gone?" Matthew continued. "It would go back to the way it was before. People will suffer, with nowhere to go."

Father Lecter put his face in his hands. He trembled with frustration and grief.

"Don't make all your work into nothing, Father. Go back to them. Be the shepherd to your flock."

Will Graham entered the department, unsure of what his next move would be. He imagined Jack Crawford leading Father Lecter away in handcuffs. He imagined the pain of Sister Bloom, the fates of all of the people in the shelter and all of the hungry people standing in line every day for their only source of food.

Do they want to be cannibals? Will thought, bile rising in his throat. Perhaps it was preferable to starving. He could see the headline written by Freddie Lounds. *Hannibal the Cannibal Priest of Bricktown*. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“Will!” Crawford called. He opened his eyes with some effort, frightened by the excess of information he had.

“He’s with the priest,” Crawford said. “Maybe he can encourage him to come clean about all the details.”

“Father Lecter?” Will asked. His face turned ashen.

“I don’t suppose you want to be facing him right now,” Crawford said. “Considering all that has happened.”

Crawford couldn’t be more right. When Will saw the priest exiting the holding cell room, he stepped around a corner and waited for him to leave.

“I’ll talk to Matthew now,” he told Crawford.

The boy was lying on his cot, his pillow pulled over his head. He glanced to his side when he heard Will arrive.

“Officer,” he said. His voice was duller now, flat and lethargic.

“Have you gotten your sins off your chest?”

“I am right with God,” he stated.

“Is that what he told you?”

“We don’t have to agree on everything.”

“He doesn’t want you to protect him.”

Matthew dropped the pillow at his side and sat up in the bed.

“If you’re so certain that Father Lecter is a murderer,” Matthew asked, “Why haven’t you told anyone?”

Will was silent. Matthew seized on that silence and darted his eyes toward him, latching onto his own. He stood up and walked toward the bars.

“You want to protect him too,” he whispered in a lithe tone. His smile returned to him.

“I know what you did with the bodies, Matthew; you and Father Lecter.”

Matthew cocked his head and bore into Will with his gaze.

“You let them give back.”

Matthew blinked and set his jaw.

“Worthless, cruel people,” Will continued, “Bringing nothing but selfishness into this world.”

“They had some worth,” Matthew added.

“The meat on their bones.”

Matthew sniffed and looked off to one side. His grin tugged at the corners of his eyes.

“Those are some dark thoughts in that head of yours, Officer,” he cooed. “Does that insight of yours ever make you wonder where you really belong?”

“Where do I belong?” Will asked.

“Straddling the line,” Matthew’s rhythmic speech beckoned, “Between the light and the shadows.”

Will clicked his tongue.

“Matthew Brown,” he murmured, “Always looking for brotherhood in a throng of strangers.”

“We are brothers, Will,” Matthew assured him. “We may not love our father equally, but we are together in this strange family.”

Crawford was waiting for him when he emerged from the cell room.

“Well?”

“He’s mulling it over,” Will replied.

It was strange working at his own desk again, looking over the case file and signing off on various reports. It was slow, tedious work, and he didn’t dare to let himself stop and be flooded with unwanted thoughts.

“Did you get a look at the paper today?” Zeller interrupted him. He glanced up from his work to see that the sky outside of the front windows had grown dark.

“Uh...” Will wiped his eyes. “No. Is it something I want to read?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Zeller shrugged, propping himself up on Will’s desk. “It’s about you.”

Will took the paper and saw what Freddie Lounds had published for that day. *Will Graham: the Man who Caught the Bricktown Ripper*. He groaned, but continued to read.

Sources at the shelter say that Will Nance (Graham) was exceptionally close to the parish priest, Father Hannibal Lecter. They even say that they shared quarters and were warm with each other in public. Father Lecter was unaware that the vagrant he housed was secretly working for the Oklahoma City Police Department.

Will's shoulders slumped. He knew that Father Lecter had read Lounds' article, as he did every morning. He imagined how it would make him feel, seeing what a paranoid, shamed mind could think was insinuating at an illicit relationship between the two of them. How would he react to the possibility that the papers would publish such a thing?

Will dropped the paper and stood up.

"What's wrong?" Zeller asked as the young officer pushed by him.

Will didn't answer, but ran out into the night.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Freddie Lounds walked along the rough alleyway. She passed under the last streetlight which illuminated her red curls before she wandered from its reach into the darkness. She knew this was the place of the Ripper's last victim, but the body had been removed, dirt shoveled over the blood. It could honestly be any spot along here. She snapped pictures of places along the walls, deciding to pick whichever one looked most ominous after development.

She glanced to one side by chance and nearly dropped her camera when she saw the silhouette of a man against the backdrop of the final streetlight. He was coming toward her, a tall figure with long strides. She considered heading quickly in the other direction when she noticed the white collar at his neck.

"Good evening, Father," she sighed. She walked toward him with her hand extended. "I was hoping I might be able to meet with you and ask you a few questions."

Father Lecter approached her and lifted his own hand toward her shoulder. She didn't see the straight razor he readied in the other. A questioning expression passed over her face.

"Father!" a voice called out from the side. They both turned to see Will hurrying toward them.

Father Lecter's eyes narrowed and he stepped back when Will placed his hand on him. He slipped the razor back in his pocket.

"You're Will Graham!" Freddie exclaimed. She reached out and shook his hand. "The man who caught the Bricktown Ripper!"

She glanced back and forth between the priest and the officer.

"We wanted to talk to you," Will said, keeping his eyes on Father Lecter. "Let you know you're telling the wrong story."

Father Lecter looked back at him with eyebrows raised.

"We have a better story for you," Will continued, "About a man who wanted to bring peace to the people of his community."

As Will and Father Lecter walked back to the church, the priest kept his stoic face forward.

"Do you think it will do any good?" he finally asked.

Will was relieved to hear him speak.

“I don’t know. If the potential jury pool has sympathetic thoughts based on what the newspapers say, it might not save him from a life behind bars but it may save his neck.”

“Perhaps they will see the good in him,” the priest replied.

“That he was a shepherd targeting wolves?”

Father Lecter looked down and Will came to a stop. He peered up at the priest’s face.

“But he wasn’t the shepherd, Father Lecter,” he said. “He was the sling.”

Father Lecter locked eyes with the young man.

“Are you here to arrest me, Will?”

Will shook his head.

“I’m here to tell you to be careful. Be more careful... in the future.”

The priest stared back at him in disbelief.

“I want you to know,” Will told him. “That everything I said... or did... with you, was sincere.”

Will couldn’t read the man’s face. It was a unique problem for him, and it made him feel terribly out of his depth. The anxiety became unbearable, and he leaned forward and kissed him. He pressed up against his body, moving his mouth against motionless lips. The priest stood perfectly still, his indecipherable face unchanging.

“I’m sorry,” Will whispered. He watched as the priest turned and walked home.

Will sat back in his desk chair, eyes staring at nothing. A paper slapped on the surface before him. Jack Crawford stood over him, shaking his head.

The Bricktown Peacekeeper, by Freddie Lounds.

Will smirked.

“This is catching on,” Crawford complained. “Papers and radio announcers all over the city are calling him ‘Peacekeeper.’”

The young officer picked up the paper and began to read. Freddie Lounds eviscerated the victims, claiming that they were parasites to Oklahoma City.

Matthew Brown roamed the streets of Bricktown at night, it read, ridding them of anyone who would prey on children or the weak.

“There’s an outcry,” Crawford continued. “People are claiming he should get a reward, not imprisonment.”

Will glanced up at him.

“I doubt it will fly in court, but who knows,” Crawford said, waving his hand over his head.

Will walked back to the holding cell.

“The Bricktown Peacekeeper,” he said in a magnanimous voice.

Matthew cocked his head.

“It has a nice ring to it.”

“I brought you something, to keep your mind active” Will said. He handed him a book through the bars.

“The Jungle, by Upton Sinclair,” Matthew read.

“I thought you might find it amusing.”

“Thank you,” he replied, and smiled. “What have you decided concerning Father Lecter?”

“I have decided, against everything I’ve ever been taught... to do nothing.”

“Straddling the line,” Matthew said.

Will came closer and lowered his voice.

“Tell them you killed your accomplice after discovering that he’d killed an innocent. Use the name Richard Anderton, he was one of the recent dead. It’s conceivable that you could have killed the rest on your own.”

He couldn’t believe the words he was speaking. Matthew nodded.

“Tell them you burned the flesh, so that the people you killed could find peace in the after-life,” Will continued. He took a breath, “No cannibalism.”

“You telling me these things,” Matthew pointed out with a coy grin, “That’s not doing nothing.”

Will shook his head and walked off. He pointed back at Matthew.

“That’s all you need to say.”

Will entered the church early Sunday evening. He walked before the row of stained glass windows, stepping into the broken light, then into shadow, then into light. He waited in the sanctuary with his hat in his hands, peering up at the new beam and patched ceiling.

A woman exited the confessional, and he stared for a moment at the empty seat inside. Finally he walked in and sat before the screen. Father Lecter’s profile leaned forward. He glanced toward him through the screen and nodded.

“Hello Will,” he murmured. His voice was gentle. Will leaned his head against the screen.

“Bless me Father,” he said, closing his eyes, “For I have committed... mortal sins.”

Chapter End Notes

That's it for this story. Thank you for reading and I hope everyone has a happy New Year!

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